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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

Vol. XXXIV.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., March 23, 1887.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

No. 439



OR,
The Swamp-Island Renegades.

A Tale of the Everglades and Jungles.

BY MAJOR D. BOONE DUMONT,
AUTHOR OF "SILVER SAM, THE DETECTIVE,"
"THE OLD RIVER SPORT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE DISCARDED DAUGHTER.

"You must take both of us, or neither."
"Then I will take neither."
"Father, how can you be so cruel?"
"I am not cruel. You are the cruel one. You leave me no choice. You know that it is impossible that I should have anything to do with that man. I tell you once more, Emma, that you must discard him or I will discard you. You must choose between us. If you decide that you will go with him, you forsake me and are no longer my daughter."
"He is my husband."
"You had no right to marry him; but that fault might be remedied."
"I have no wish to remedy what you call a fault. I will go with my husband."

THE SAURIAN MONSTERS HAD TASTED THE BLOOD OF THE TWO NEGROES WHO HAD BEEN SHOT, AND WERE NOT TO BE BALKED OF ANOTHER VICTIM.

"Go, then, and I promise you most solemnly that I will never see you again if I can help it."

It was the old story—a girl who had married against her father's will, and an obstinate father, if not an obdurate one, who would not forgive her.

There was every reason why he should not forgive her, and she had no right to expect his forgiveness.

If ever a man had cause to utterly dislike and abominate another, there was ample justification for the antipathy of Emma Plympton's father toward the man whom his daughter had chosen.

Benjamin Plympton had come to Pennsylvania when he was a young man, and had there grown wealthy and respected.

By industry and frugality, combined with enterprise, shrewdness and correct principles, he had built up an extensive and largely profitable business, and was held in high consideration, not only because of his wealth, but because of his personal character.

The man whom his daughter had married was a penniless adventurer, and there was good reason to believe that he was as destitute of principle as he was of cash or the industry that might procure cash.

During the great Civil War which had been not long since brought to an end, Benjamin Plympton was an enthusiastic Union man, using all his influence and giving largely of his means in support of the cause that he believed to be above all things just and righteous.

It might be said that he was inclined to be fanatical in his devotion to the Union, declaring upon all occasions that every Southern soldier, no matter what he might have believed or how he might have been influenced, was a traitor who deserved death upon the gallows.

Yet Absalom Startle, the man who had stolen his daughter from him, had been a Southern soldier, a pirate at that, with no redeeming trait of character or phase of circumstances to excuse or palliate his disloyalty to the section of his birth and education.

The close of the war had found that Absalom Startle in a Northern military prison, and after his release he had remained in the North wandering from place to place, and picking up a precarious living in a more or less questionable manner by means of his wits.

He had made the acquaintance of Emma Plympton at a town where she was attending a boarding-school, had succeeded in fascinating the young and romantic girl, and had followed her home in vacation time.

It is not to be supposed that he was ignorant of the wealth and position of her father, who was known personally or by reputation to everybody in that region.

Benjamin Plympton saw him going about the village with the young lady, and made a business of inquiring about him, soon finding out all he wanted to know.

He cautioned Emma against the man, giving her his character in a nutshell, and ordered her, under pain of her father's severest displeasure, to have nothing more to do with Startle.

Her ready assent to his wishes disarmed his suspicions, and yet the only effect was to render her meetings with Startle not less frequent, but more secret.

The girl was infatuated. She was filled with the belief that she only could understand and appreciate her lover, though she expected the whole world in time to fall down and worship at the shrine where she had placed him.

Like many another, she "meant well, but didn't know."

The first intimation her father had of her continued disobedience was the fact of her elopement, which was made so plain to him that he could not doubt it.

Then, after a letter from her which he did not answer, and after a reasonable lapse of time for a honeymoon and for sober consideration of the matter, she brought her husband to him, asking forgiveness for both, and of course demanding a restoration of her rights and privileges at home, for herself and her husband.

It was not without reason that she expected to be forgiven, even in the face of her flagrant disobedience of her father's commands.

He was a widower, and she was his only child, and his life was bound up with hers.

It was not possible that he could forsake her, and to whom but to her should he give the property which he had accumulated for her sake?

Yet she found him as hard as rock and as cold as ice.

His antipathy to the man she had chosen was so intense that he could scarcely tolerate Absalom Startle in his presence for a moment.

He had thought the matter over during her absence—indeed, he had hardly thought of anything else—and had but one proposition to make to her, from which no consideration could persuade him to swerve.

If she desired to return to her father, she must give up her husband and never see him again; otherwise she would be an outcast from her home.

When she declared her intention of sticking to her husband, and was told to take herself off, she felt that she had a right to consider herself an aggrieved young woman.

Absalom Startle attempted to come out in a heroic role, for that occasion only.

"I came here at my wife's request," said he, "and we have both done our duty. If other folks don't do theirs, it can't be helped. I can take care of my wife, and don't ask help from anybody."

If anything more had been needed to turn the sweetness of Benjamin Plympton's nature to gall this speech would have done it.

He told his daughter that she had heard his last word, and that she must come to his terms or leave him and her home forever.

She went away in tears, and also in anger, but soon dried her eyes and clung more closely to her husband, vowing that she would never desert him, and expressing a sublime confidence in his willingness and ability to shape a splendid future for them both.

Again it was the old story. The scamp who had married her in the hope of gaining position and property soon showed himself in his true light, and made her regret the day she had first seen him.

He dragged her from place to place in his vagrant existence—or she followed him because there was nothing else for her to cling to—and her life was thereafter a continued round of poverty and wretchedness and misery.

He was constantly reproaching her with being a burden to him, and endeavoring to force her to appeal to her father for aid.

She did so, again and again, particularly when her boy was born; but her letters were unanswered.

The hope that Benjamin Plympton would relent kept her up for some time; but she sunk at last under the weight of hardships and abuse, and when her boy was five years old she lay on her death-bed.

They had then drifted down to Florida, where Absalom Startle, having become connected with a gang of the tough subjects of that region, was picking up a livelihood by methods in which honesty was not considered.

Again it was the old story, but with a little variation.

The dying woman wrote a last letter to her father, informing him of her condition, and begging him to come to Florida after her death, which would surely occur before he could get her letter, to take her boy from Absalom Startle, who would be glad to get rid of him, and place him where he would be decently cared for and properly brought up.

As it happened, Benjamin Plympton was far from his home when that letter was written, traveling with the view of combining the pursuit of business with the pursuit of health.

The letter was forwarded to him, and it followed him from place to place, just missing him at each flight, until it finally rested from its wanderings and settled down in the Dead Letter Office.

When it became an assured fact that Emma Startle had been absolutely discarded by her father, hopes began to spring in the breast of the old man's next of kin, after his daughter.

That was his nephew, Morley Plympton by name, a person whom Benjamin Plympton had for a long time intensely disliked, and apparently with good reason.

But there was no other kinsman to whom the old man's money could go, his daughter being cut out, and Morley had at least gone to the war on the Union side as a sutler, and that was a point in his favor, though a small one.

Benjamin Plympton made overtures to his nephew, which Morley was glad to accept, took him into his business, and made him promises of preferment and future prosperity, conditional on good behavior.

The good behavior began well, but failed to hold out.

Morley Plympton was vicious by nature, and had not enough of a true villain's sense to curb his propensities until his future was secure.

Deeming himself stunted in the matter of money by the old man, he secured a considerable sum by forging his uncle's name, and the forgery was discovered.

He gained immunity from punishment through Benjamin Plympton's forbearance, but no forgiveness nor anything like it.

On the contrary, his uncle ordered him off, telling him plainly that he would never have anything more to do with him, and would never willingly see his face again.

After that occurrence Benjamin Plympton, who had been failing in health since his daughter's mad act, began to decay quite rapidly, and was finally persuaded to try a milder climate, with the view of lengthening the unsatisfactory remnant of his life.

He went to Cuba, and there, after dragging out a few more painful years, he died and was buried.

Before his death repentance came to him—or, at least, regret—together with the necessity of making some disposal of his property.

Remembering well the fact that a son had been born to his daughter, he consulted with an

old and trusty friend, Tom Cresswell by name, who was then in Cuba on business, as to what he might, could or should do for his possibly living daughter and her child or children.

As a result of this consultation he made a will, which he intrusted to Cresswell, together with the valuables in his possession there, giving instructions which his old friend faithfully promised to carry out to the best of his ability.

Tom Cresswell, after attending to the burial of Benjamin Plympton and to such other matters on the island as needed his attention, set sail for Baltimore on a brigantine which he had chartered and with a cargo which he owned.

The brigantine was wrecked on the Florida Coast, and all on board were lost.

CHAPTER II.

STARTLE, THE WRECKER.

DANGER POINT was and continues to be near one of the worst bits of sea bottom on the Florida Coast.

At the eastward and southward, and in a less degree at the northward, too, were hidden reefs which never showed their tops except during an unusually low tide, and whose existence was seldom made known by the breaking up of the ocean swell until a vessel had approached them too near for her safety.

The Point was a narrow strip of sand running directly out into the ocean, and its seaward terminus was, strangely enough, a mass of rock that almost deserved to be called an eminence.

This pile of rock was probably the end of a reef which had accumulated sand and debris until it had formed a connection with the main land; but the sand strip was still quite narrow and so low that at high tides it was mostly covered by water.

Nobody would have expected to find a habitation there, and yet there was one.

A small hut crouched under the rocks at the southwesterly side—if the rocky mass could be said to have a side—and was so low and so placed, doubtless with the view of getting shelter from the worst of the winds, that it would scarcely be recognized as a habitation except upon a rear view.

Close inspection would have shown it to be poorly constructed and of most incongruous material.

It had been built of bits of wreckage that had come ashore from time to time, and other bits of wreckage had been heaped against and piled on top of the original structure, until it looked to be nothing but a mass of such stuff flung together by the waves and winds.

Yet there was fine material in it, though in questionable shape—fragments of costly wood that had been diverted from their original purposes and become battered and weather-stained, and a curious person would have found matter for study and speculation within it and all about it.

The entrance was by a once handsome door, which had formerly ornamented a ship's cabin, and within was a room which was painfully small but not as comfortless as one on the outside might suppose it to be.

There was a fireplace at one end, connected with a rude and low stone chimney outside, and there were two decent bunks, with a table, some battered chairs, and a chest and some lockers, together with a lot of cooking utensils that might have been gathered from the four quarters of the globe.

One gloomy and muggy afternoon in February there were two persons in that queer little hut.

One of them was a man of about forty, grizzled and weatherbeaten, and with a hard look on his face that added at least ten years to his apparent age.

The other was a boy of sixteen, tall for his years, and slimly built as yet, but with remarkably bright black eyes.

Though his face was bronzed, and his hands were rough, and his clothing was of the coarsest and rudest make, his expressive features were full of intelligence, and his words and actions showed quickness and alertness that had been trained in the hard school of necessity.

The man was seated in one of the battered chairs, smoking strong tobacco in a short pipe, and the boy was kneeling at the hearth, busy in preparing the coming meal.

As the tide was then low, a horseman came riding from the main land across the sand strip toward the pile of rock at the end.

His horse's hoofs sunk noiselessly in the sand, and could not be supposed to give any indication of his approach; but the senses of the man in the hut had been sharpened by peculiar uses.

"Thar's somebody or somethin' comin' this way, Sam," he remarked.

"Mebbe it's the wind," answered the boy.

"Thar ain't no wind. Hello! Yes, it's somebody."

A hail from the outside gave point to this remark, and the man opened the door and found there the rider who had come from the main land, and who had just then dismounted and hitched his horse.

The stranger was a man of medium height, apparently somewhat younger than the man of

the hut, and passably well-dressed, but with an unpleasant expression of countenance and a general appearance that was suggestive of evil thoughts and ways.

"Thought I'd better holler to you," said he, "as it might be a bit safer."

"All right," answered the other. "Come in, if you've made your crittur fast thar."

The stranger walked into the hut, and glowered at the lad on the floor.

"Look here, Startle," he said, "I want to have some particular talk with you, and we don't need the boy about."

"Go out doors, Sam," ordered Absalom Startle, "and pick up chips till I call you."

Sam Startle obeyed without a word, giving the stranger a sidelong glance that was not suggestive of a friendly feeling for him.

The visitor seated himself in one of the battered chairs at the table, and from an inner pocket of his coat produced a flat flask.

"Try this, Startle," said he.

Absalom Startle poured out a very liberal drink, and absorbed it quietly and with evident satisfaction.

"I suppose you have come on business," Absalom observed, as he filled and lighted his pipe. "The sooner we get at it and over it the better, Mr—"

"Morley. Have you forgotten my name already?"

"Let's get at it, then, Mr. Morley, and I reckon you had better talk kinder low, as that boy has got sharp ears, and it ain't necessary that he should know everythin'."

"I don't want him to know this, anyhow. It's the business that I was speaking to you about the other day, when we met over at Cator's place."

"That's what I reckoned it was. Anythin' new?"

"Just this that's new. The job that I wanted you to do must be done now, if it can be done at all."

"That's the p'int, Mr. Morley. What reason is thar to s'pose it can be done at all? One vessel out of a hundred, and it's only a chance if she gets along at night or comes anywhar near my place of business."

"That chance is what I want you to work on, though. I know when the vessel left Matanzas, and I judge, after studying the thing pretty close, allowing for the wind and the set of the stream, that she ought to be off this coast to-night. Well, it is my opinion that we are going to have a rough night."

"Mebbe you think so because you're wishin' for it," suggested Startle.

"I think so because I am fairly well read in weather signs, and I think that a storm is gathering."

"Praps you're right. I hain't noticed the looks o' the weather at all carefully since mornin'. Well, if a storm is comin', the brig'd be apt to claw off-shore and get out o' the way of my place of business."

"I don't think she will see it soon enough for that. It is to-night that I expect the storm, and when it clouds up the night will be very dark. Now, Startle, I believe I understand your business. You are a wrecker."

"That's the name for it, I reckon."

"And of course you have a wrecker's ways and means. You know where and how to put up false lights so as to lure a vessel onto the reefs about here."

"Well, I ain't given to that sort of thing; but I do know how to do it, and I can do it if the job will pay."

"You remember the offer I made you, and that you as good as accepted it."

The wrecker helped himself to another sizable dram of Mr. Morley's liquor, and lighted his pipe again by way of putting on his considering cap.

"A thousand dollars is a big pile of money," said he; "but this would be workin' on a chance, you see—only a sort o' speculation, as I may say. If I should happen to bring the wrong vessel onto the reefs, thar wouldn't be any money in the job for Ab. Startle."

"You would have a good chance to pick up what came ashore."

"Do you s'pose I'd do such a thing just for that? I'm to'able low down, Mr. Morley; but I hain't got that far along. You don't seem to quite know me yet."

"I didn't mean to say anything offensive, Mr. Startle. Help yourself to the whisky if it suits you. What sort of a kink has got into the business now?"

The visitor helped himself to some of his own liquor, perhaps with the view of bracing himself up to the development of the kink.

"I don't like to work on nothin' but a speculation," answered Startle. "As it's a chance that I've got to take, I shall want to be paid for takin' the chance."

"Well, I don't know but there's reason in that. What do you offer, then?"

"Pay me half the money down, Mr. Morley, and I'll engage to do the very best I can for you. If I fail to get any vessel, or get the wrong one, that ends it. If I happen to work the trick just to suit you, I'm to have the rest of the money."

As Morley twisted and squirmed in his chair, and knitted his brows, it was evident that the negotiation had taken a turn that did not please him.

"That is rather rough on me," he remarked.

"If I should come to your terms, I would have to trust to you entirely to get a return for my money. I don't think I know you well enough for that."

"You know me as well as I know you, I reckon, and mebbe a little better. You can trust to me to do what I promise to do just as I can trust to you to pay me a thousand dollars after the work is done, or five hundred, for that matter. Them's my terms, Mr. Morley, and I don't take the job unless you come up to 'em."

"I suppose I will have to come to them, then. The fact is, Startle, that I had expected to give you something in advance, though not as much as you demand. You shall have the five hundred, then, on condition that you agree to do your best, and that if you don't happen to strike any vessel you will give me back the money."

"Well, yes—I reckon that's fair for both sides."

"Here's your money, then."

Mr. Morley must have anticipated the demand that would be made upon him, as he produced a roll of bills that contained exactly the sum required.

He counted it out on the table, and Startle counted it after him and stuffed the roll in his pocket.

"That clinches the bargain," said the wrecker, "and there's nothin' more to be said or done this day. Come around to-morrer, Mr. Morley, and then you'll know what's been hit or missed. You may depend on Ab. Startle to do his best, and that's all he can do."

The visitor went out, and Startle accompanied him to the door, and saw him mount his horse and ride away.

Then the wrecker stood in the doorway, looking after the horseman, with one hand in his pocket feeling the roll of money.

"Reckon I struck that cuss about right," he muttered. "But he must have a to'able sure thing on the brig comin' off this coast to-night, or he wouldn't ha' been so willin' to pony up his ducats. Wonder if he's got as sure a thing on the weather as he thinks he has?"

The wrecker stepped out on the sand, and looked up at the sky and around at the horizon.

Deeper and deeper the mass of leaden clouds had settled down since he took his last squint at the weather, and there was still no wind to speak of, though the morning's drizzle had ceased; but there was a lurid light in the sky at the eastward that gave threatening promise of a change.

"Durned if I don't believe the feller's hit it," he remarked. "We're likely to have a twister before mornin', if I read the sign right."

He glanced at Sam, who was not picking up chips, as the occupation to which he had been dismissed was purely imaginary.

The lad was looking after the stranger as he rode away, and a wave of his father's hand brought him speedily to the hut.

"Who's that chap, dad?" he inquired.

"A man from the shore who had some business with me. His name is Morley, he says."

"I'll remember that. I don't like his looks."

"Well, thar's one thing about him that I like, and that's the main thing, too. But that ain't none o' your business, boy. Shouldn't wonder if we're goin' to have a rough night, Sam."

"Feels that way to me."

"So you are gettin' weather-wise, are you?"

"Pickin' it up a bit, I reckon. Somethin' 'll be comin' ashore, mebbe."

"I'll look after that. Let's get our supper, and then you may go to bed and take it easy."

CHAPTER III.

"THE JOB IS DONE!"

SAM STARTLE was in no sort of a hurry to go to bed and take things easy.

He was sharp enough to know that there was something in the wind, and with that something he naturally connected the visit of the evil-eyed stranger.

After supper he lounged about, watching his father as he sat and smoked, and occasionally putting in a question about the man who called himself Morley, to which he got very unsatisfactory answers or none at all.

When Absalom Startle had finished smoking, he gruffly ordered the boy to bed, and Sam crawled into his bunk with his clothes on, and lay there with both his bright eyes wide open.

The wrecker put on a heavy pea-jacket and a sou'wester, and sallied out into the air.

The night was then very dark, so dark that the hut could not be descried at the distance of a few paces; but Absalom Startle was so well acquainted with every inch of the ground that he walked about as securely as in daylight.

What he had come out for was to take a look at the weather.

It was true that he could not see much of it, except as pigs are said to see the wind; but his other senses were sufficiently acute to make him a very fair barometer.

The day had been quite chilly for the climate;

but the night was oppressively hot, with a moveless, smothering warmth that was almost sure to be followed by a tornado.

There was still a lurid tinge in the sky at the eastward, and the peculiar singing of the surf on the reefs was always regarded as the prelude to a storm.

"That cuss of a Morley must be a weather witch," he muttered. "It's comin' out just as he said it would, and if the brig he wants happens to be off this coast to-night, she's a goner for sure. Wonder what he wants her smashed for, anyhow. Insurance money, I reckon. Such a job is well worth a thousand dollars, and I've got five hundred of it. He'll have to come down with the rest right away, or I'll blow on him and spoil his game."

Having satisfied himself concerning the state and prospects of the weather, the wrecker went back into the hut, where he got a lantern and a stiff drink of Morley's whisky.

He lighted the lantern, which burned with a clear and broad light, and went out again, after casting a watchful glance at Sam, whose quiet and curled-up form gave no indication of the wakefulness that had hold of him.

Outside the night was, if possible, darker than before, and what the wild waves were saying was a story that Absalom Startle knew by heart.

He climbed up to the summit of the pile of rocks, and hoisted his lantern to the top of a stout pole that was securely planted there.

Then he sat down and waited and watched, his ears intent on singing of the surf, and his eyes fixed on the lurid sky at the eastward.

In the course of an hour or so the storm that he had expected began to burst—not with a sudden explosion, but with a constantly increasing intensity of onslaught.

It growled like a bear before it sprang like a lion.

The heavy mass of cloud overhead was breaking up, and through the rifts the lightning played and occasionally lighted up the black sky.

Startle had then drawn from his pocket a night glass, with which he scanned the seaward horizon continually.

During the continuance of one of the electric displays he saw, or believed that he saw, the topmasts of a vessel at a considerable distance beyond the reefs.

It was only a glance, but enough to set him at work in earnest.

"If that Morley ain't a wizard," he muttered as he hauled down the lantern, "his luck's a durned sight better'n he has any sort o' right to. The vessel off thar must be the brig he wants. It's bound to be. Astonshin' how things do work out for some folks."

He seated himself on the summit of the pile of rocks, with the lantern before him, facing seaward, and covered it in front with his big sou'wester, removing that article of head gear at regular intervals for a few seconds, thus alternating darkness with flashes of light.

The wickedness of this little game will be understood when it is stated that some ten or twelve miles north of Danger Point there was a revolving light, and just below that light was an inlet which afford good anchorage and a pretty safe harbor.

To imitate that light, and thus to lure a storm-driven vessel upon the deadly reefs, was manifestly the scheme of the murderous wrecker.

In this endeavor the lives of passengers or crew were not considered, nor the value of the property that must be utterly destroyed.

The scheme was to bring the wrecker in one thousand dollars, which was to him a vast amount of money just then, and that was the only point on which he permitted his thoughts to dwell.

Meanwhile the storm was increasing rapidly in strength and intensity, the cloud rack was flying more wildly, the wind was blowing great guns, the surf had changed its song to a howl, the lightning was more vivid and less intermittent, the thunder peals were heavier and more continuous, and the blasts were beginning to pick off the white caps of the waves and fling them shoreward, the spume flying up to where the solitary watcher was seated at his devilish work.

It was really monotonous, that machine-like imitation of the action of a revolving light; but Absalom Startle kept at it steadily without the least intermission in his abominable task of covering and uncovering his lantern, except for a second or two which he used in readjusting the lenses of his glass.

Thereafter, while he worked the light with one hand, he kept the glass to his eyes with the other, watching for the reappearance of the vessel that he was striving to decoy into the clutches of the reefs.

Steadily he worked the light, and eagerly he gazed seaward, especially when the lightning blaze lit up the distance, and showed him the expanse of raging ocean.

At last he caught sight of the vessel for which he was searching, and clearly made it out to be a brigantine, nearly stripped of its canvas, and heading directly for the reefs.

He kept on working the light, more steadily, more venomously, more murderously than ever.

Still the doomed vessel came sweeping on toward the reefs, each moment more clearly seen by the lightning flashes as she rose on the crests of the waves.

More closely and intently the wrecker watched her as she came on, until—

Until she disappeared suddenly and utterly, and was never again visible to his eyes or any other eyes.

She was so far away that no crash nor the faintest sound of a cry could be heard at Danger Point, and Absalom Startle did not suffer his imagination to conjecture the real nature and extent of the catastrophe.

All that was nothing to him.

Yet he knew well enough what had happened, and how and why it had happened.

It was a question of a thousand dollars to him, and that was all.

"The job's done!" he said, grimly, as he shut up his glass, and replaced it in his pocket.

He took up his lantern, climbed down the pile of rocks, and returned to the hut, carefully extinguishing the light before he entered.

When he got inside, his first action, after closing the door, was to help himself to a big cupful of Morley's whisky, and then he dropped into a chair and passed his hand over his brow as if something hurt him.

Perhaps conscience was not dead within him, and was presenting to his mind's eye the terrible picture of the shattered brig and her drowning crew.

But the whisky, that was already beginning to buzz within his brain, would soon put an end to that nonsense.

Sam Startle would have been willing to swear that he had not slept a wink since his father went out; but a boy is a boy, tied to the necessities of eating and sleeping, and he had surely dozed off, though so lightly that he did not know the difference between sleeping and waking.

He was wide enough awake when his father came in, and soon made his condition manifest to the ears of his parent.

"Is it a bad night, dad?"

"Mighty bad. Big storm drivin' on shore."

"What you been doin'?"

"Outside lookin' at the weather and things."

"See anythin' off thar?"

"Off thar" was of course understood to mean the ocean beyond the reefs.

"Thought I saw some sort of a vessel, but ain't sure—the night's so black."

"Golly, dad, if she should try to skin the reef this night, it would jump right up and snap her like a 'gator."

"Mebbe it has snapped her already."

"Shouldn't wonder, and then thar'd be somethin' comin' ashore. Mayn't I go out and look around? I don't feel a bit like sleepin'."

The boy had no idea as yet of the fearfulness of a wreck on those reefs, and the only idea he cherished in connection with such an occurrence was that of "somethin' comin' ashore."

"You may go if you want to," answered Absalom Startle; "but be careful, Sam, and don't fool with the surf. I'll be comin' out directly."

Sam only stopped to tie a sou'wester on his head, and hurried out to enjoy the weather, as storms were always a delight to him.

His father lighted a pipe, and smoked a few minutes, but soon laid it down in disgust.

Clearly there was something preying on his mind that would not allow him to enjoy his tobacco.

He helped himself to another big cupful of whisky, exhausting the bottle which Morley had left, and the liquor was so potent that he staggered as he went out of the hut.

Spray was flying all over the sand strip, and the storm did not show the least sign of abatement.

At the shore he found Sam, who was galloping about and pointing joyfully at bits of wreckage that were being washed up by the surf.

"The reef nabbed that craft you saw, dad," he yelled at the top of his voice, so as to make himself heard above the roaring of the wind and waves.

"It nabbed somethin', anyhow," assented his father.

"Lots o' stuff comin' ashore. We'll get plenty o' wood to burn, if nothin' else."

"No cargo, though, I'm afeard. The reef kills the best of our chances. Don't meddle with the stuff now, Sammy. It'll all be here safe enough when the storm dies down."

They wandered together along the edge of the sand strip, just out of reach of the surf, the father continually restraining the impatience of the son, who often saw something he wanted to secure, and then they wandered back over the same route.

Hardly had they reached the hut that crouched at the foot of the pile of rock, when Absalom Startle put his hand to his head and staggered for a moment.

"What's the matter, dad?" demanded Sam, whose sharp eyes at once noticed this unusual action.

"Nothin'," was the hoarse reply. "Come in here out o' the wind."

The father drew the son behind a jutting rock where they were partly screened from the noise of the howling elements.

Steadying himself against the rock, he laid his two hands on the lad's shoulders, while Sam stared at him as if wondering what had come over his dad.

There was no guessing the reason of his strange behavior, unless he was drunk, and he did not act as he usually did when he was drunk, as Sam had good reason to know.

Absalom Startle soon made known what was the matter with him, and it was something so unexpected that the boy shivered under the grip on his shoulders.

"Sam, you'll remember that man Morley who rode over here."

"Reckon I will."

"There's somethin' that forces me to tell you this, Sam. He hired me to wreck the brig that's gone to pieces in this storm—to draw her onto the reef with a false light. If anythin' happens, I want you to remember that."

"Why, dad, what's likely to happen?"

"Nothin', as far as I know; but—remember that!"

"You bet I will."

Sam was so dazed by this communication, the full import of which he did not at once understand, that he failed to notice his father as he ran down to the beach, and did not turn to catch sight of him until he was about to plunge into the surf.

The boy yelled at him and ran toward him, and the man halted.

He had seen something in the water that he wanted to get hold of.

There was a piece of timber tossing about in the surf, probably a fragment of a topmast or a yard, with a lot of top-hammer attached to it, and entangled in the mass was something that looked like a chest or box.

"I want to get that, Sam," said he. "Wait you here a bit while I go and bring it out."

Absalom Startle watched his chance and plunged into the surf, while his son gazed after him somewhat anxiously.

There was nothing really dangerous in the attempt, as he was well acquainted with the flux and reflux of the surf there, and had often breasted it safely when there were more chances against him; but Sam was filled with a foreboding of evil, doubtless produced by his father's strange words.

The wrecker grabbed the box, freed it from its entanglement, and had started to return to the beach when his fate overtook him.

The piece of timber which the surf was dashing about suddenly rose up on end, as if it had been a living thing animated by a murderous purpose, darted toward the shore, and fell on the head of the doomed man, striking him senseless.

Sam Startle, with a sharp cry, rushed into the water, seized his father, and, by a frantic exertion of all his strength, dragged him out upon the sand.

CHAPTER IV.

SAM'S FIRST VISITOR.

It was a great effort that the boy was obliged to put forth, and when he had finally succeeded in dragging his father fully out of the reach of the waves that thundered on the shore he was so utterly exhausted that he could do nothing but sink on the sand and wait until he could recover his breath.

In the mean time Absalom Startle did not move or give any sign of life.

The situation was a terrible one for Sam, and his father's forebodings and strange words came back to him forcibly.

"If anything happens," he had been told to remember something.

Something had happened, and the thing that he was to remember was ineffaceably impressed upon his recollection.

He did not doubt that his father was dead, as he had seen the broken spar when it darted forward to do its deadly work, and was sure that the crushing blow it struck could scarcely leave a spark of life in the stoutest man.

As soon as he could stir he crawled to the insensible body and examined it as well as he was able.

It seemed to him that his father was still breathing faintly, and therefore could not be yet dead; but Sam spoke to him again and again without getting any answer or perceiving the least indication that his voice had been heard.

He hastened to the hut for some whisky, which he knew to be his father's favorite remedy for most of the ills that flesh is heir to, ran back and put it to the lips of the dead or dying man.

Absalom Startle failed to open his eyes, and made not the faintest effort to swallow a drop of the liquor.

That settled the question. He refused his whisky, and of course he was dead.

As there was no longer any sign of breath or pulsation in the body, this conclusion was a safe one and well supported.

The boy dropped a few tears to mingle with the flying spray, and then dried his eyes and prepared to face his responsibilities as far as he could understand them and to the best of his ability.

He recognized the solemn fact that he was left alone in the world, and at the same time two other facts pressed themselves upon his attention.

His father's body was in his care, and the hut and its belongings, such as they were, had become his property.

His first move was to drag the corpse still further up on the sand, to straighten out the limbs and give it as decent an appearance as possible.

Then he went to the hut, and from under a shelter at the side lugged out an old sail, with which he carefully covered the remains, placing on each corner as heavy a stone as he could lift.

After that his attention was turned to the box, which was lying at the edge of the surf, just beyond the reach of the returning waves.

To this the unconscious man had clung tenaciously, as if with a death-grip, after he had been struck by the spar, and it had not dropped from his grasp until his son dragged him away from the water.

Sam Startle picked up the box, the lift being about as much as he could manage, and carried it to a spot on the sand near the hut, where he was partly sheltered from the wind, and there he examined it as well as he could in the darkness.

It was not a seaman's chest—that was evident at a glance—nor was it any kind of a chest, but quite a different object, and unlike anything Sam Startle remembered to have seen.

It was a square box, and a flat one—that is to say, it had more length and breadth than thickness—and the material was mahogany, polished, rounded at the edges, and protected at the corners by ornamental brass work.

It was locked, and the keyhole had an ivory fitting.

The entire outfit had been somewhat battered by the rough usage of waves and rocks; but there was not a break or crack in the wood.

As this was evidently a valuable box, probably with contents of value, Sam Startle viewed it as a new responsibility that had been laid upon his young shoulders.

All the wreckage and floatage that came ashore on the sandspit belonged to his father during his lifetime, and after the death of the father it all came to the son by heritage, including that box, which was the latest prize won from the ocean.

Sam Startle, therefore, supposed that the box belonged to him, and he was strongly possessed by the belief that he must cling to and defend what was his own.

So he bethought himself concerning the box, and how he should dispose of it so that he would be able to keep it and claim it when he wanted it.

Somebody would be coming over to Danger Point before long.

The death of his father would be almost sure to bring strangers there, and he had more than a suspicion that the man whom he had been told to remember would shortly show himself there again.

Sam dug a hole in the sand, well out of the reach of the water, and near the pile of rock, buried the box there, and smoothed the sand neatly, so as to conceal the place of deposit.

It still lacked some hours of morning, and he did not know what to do with himself.

He did not object to remaining there near the corpse, as it had no terrors for him; but the feeling of utter loneliness that had taken possession of him was very oppressive.

He was almost sorry that he had buried the box, as that had been some company for him while it was above ground.

After wandering along the beach for some time, watching the gradual abatement of the storm, and noting the bits of wreckage that came ashore; he entered the hut, crawled into his bunk, and tried to sleep; but the effort was thoroughly unsuccessful.

Again he sallied out, restless and forlorn, and the time passed slowly and miserably until morning broke.

Then he cooked and ate some breakfast, which was a great relief to him as an occupation, as well as a revive and a stay to his strength.

After breakfast he rummaged the inside of the hut, looking into everything, though he was already well acquainted with all the contents of the wretched habitation.

He found a little money, which he promptly stuffed into a pocket of his trousers, and found his father's revolver, which he concealed in an outside pocket of his peajacket, after noting that it was fully loaded and in good order.

A pistol was a good thing to have, and its possession made Sam so proud that it seemed to add at least an inch to his stature.

He went out on the beach, and the situation there was a little pleasanter and much less lonely than it had been during the night.

The storm had entirely ceased, and the wind had gone down, and the sun was shining brightly, and the ocean was smiling and singing as if rejoicing in its deadly work of the night before.

There was plenty of driftwood on the beach, and various floatage of more or less value had come ashore; but Sam did not attempt to secure

anything, as he had been in the habit of doing while his father was alive.

He did not expect to continue his residence on Danger Point, and was already in his imagination far from that solitary sandspit.

There lay his father's body, closely covered by the old sail, and it was clearly beyond the power of ordering him about or hindering his movements any more.

The world was before him, and he was his own master.

Of course it would be necessary to make some proper disposal of the dead man, and that point puzzled poor Sam considerably.

He had an indefinite idea that funerals and other ceremonies were absolute requirements in such cases, though his experience supplied him with scarcely any suggestions for the purpose, even his mother's death being not a strongly-marked event in his memory.

It seemed to him that it would be necessary to go over to the mainland and find somebody who would give him advice and assistance in what ought to be done.

Yet he did not want to go away and leave the body, being fearful that somebody or something might interfere with it in his absence.

Besides, he was expecting the arrival of the man whom he had been told to remember, and on the whole his opinion was that he had better wait awhile.

He did not have to wait very long before something happened to vary the monotony and change the situation.

The sun was not yet three hours high when the man named Morley came riding from the mainland over the sandspit, and dismounted at the hut as he had done the day before.

To Sam Startle his appearance was even more villainous and forbidding than it had been when he came on his evil errand, though there was a look of almost joyful expectation in his face that gave it a lurid brightness.

As Sam saw the man then, a feeling of repulsion arose in his breast, and it did not lack much of amounting to absolute hatred.

Morley looked about, as if searching for the man whom he had hired to do the scoundrelly deed of the night before.

He did not see him anywhere about, but saw his son standing with his hands in his pockets and staring at the stranger.

Perhaps it occurred to the stranger that it might be well to interview the son before encountering the father, as Sam might give him some points which Absalom Startle might be inclined to withhold from him.

"Was there a heavy storm here last night, sonny?" he inquired.

"Tol'able hefty," answered Sam, who was disposed to be sparing of words, while he did not exactly understand the position he occupied with regard to the stranger.

"So I should judge by the signs on the beach. It looks to me as if some vessel might have been wrecked on this coast. Did anything of the kind happen last night?"

"Some sort of a craft got nabbed by the reef, I reckon."

"Do you know what kind of a craft it was—ship—schooner—brig—or what?"

"Well, dad he kinder allowed it might ha' been a brig. That's what he told me."

"What was her name? Did he tell you that?"

"Well, dad he wasn't out there, you know, and I reckon he didn't know no more about it than you or I did, and so he didn't tell me that."

"Did anything come ashore besides the stuff I see scattered about the beach—any bodies, or anything of value?"

"Well, thar's the stuff to show for itself. Dad and I hain't bothered with it."

If anything of value had come ashore, it must be the box which Sam Startle had buried; but he had already determined that the man Morley was the last person to whom he would disclose the existence of that article.

"Is your father in the cabin there?" demanded the visitor.

"Not jest now."

"Has he gone over to the shore?"

"Not to yander shore, anyhow."

"He don't seem to be anywhere about here. Where is he? I want to see him."

"You want to see dad right now?" queried Sam.

"Of course I do. Didn't I tell you so?"

"Come along then, and take a look at him."

Morley followed the lad, evidently wondering what he meant by his peculiar style of speaking, to the place where Absalom Startle's body lay covered by the old sail.

The boy bent down and pushed one of the stones off from the covering.

"If you want to see dad," said Sam as he lifted a corner of the sail, "here he is!"

CHAPTER V.

HIS SECOND VISITOR.

THE little scene was dramatic, not only because of the action and aspect of the boy, but by reason of its effect upon Morley.

Perhaps he had expected something of the kind—indeed, he must naturally have looked for

it—seeing nothing of the man he was seeking, and the appearance of the sail being suggestive as he approached it; but the sight that was disclosed to him was nevertheless something of a shock.

"Is he dead?" was the ejaculation that rose to his lips.

"Well, it kinder looks that way," coldly answered Sam. "It's been lookin' that way since midnight, and I reckon it'll keep on lookin' that way, if not more so. I tell ye, mister, if thar was anythin' dad did last night that he ought to be sorry fur, and I hope thar wasn't, he's gone and paid fur it."

The boy's words seemed to recall the man to a realization of his own position, and to a remembrance of the cause that had brought him there.

"It is better than I could have hoped for," he muttered, "if the rest has gone right."

"What's that, mister?" sharply demanded Sam Startle.

"Nothing, sonny. I was thinking of something far from here just then. How did this happen?"

"D'ye mean about dad?" inquired Sam as he replaced the sail and the stone.

"Yes. How did he die? He must have been killed in some way? What killed him?"

"Well, dad he stepped out into the surf, jest as he'd done ever so many times afore, to git holt o' somethin' thar, and a piece of a spar jumped up and hit him on the head, and it settled him quick as a wink."

"What was he trying to get hold of?"

"That same piece of a spar, with a lot of riggin' hitched to it. I reckon it's knockin' about somewhar."

"Poor fellow! It's a great pity, and I am sorry for you, bub. I was anxious to see him this morning, too. He has something of mine that I want. Perhaps it is in one of his pockets. I will look and see."

Morley started to lift the sheet and put his intention in execution; but the small but resolute form of Sam Startle barred the way, and his shrill voice was used effectively:

"No you don't, mister! Jest go along and 'tend to your own business. Nobody's goin' to touch dad till the funeral man comes along."

"Don't give me any more of your nonsense, boy. Get out of the way."

Sam did not get out of the way, but interposed something else in the way.

As Morley started to step forward, he was met by a revolver, cocked and leveled at him, and the boy's look was as firm and threatening as his words were.

"Stand back, mister! If you try to touch dad, I'll let daylight through you, sure as the reef nabbed the brig!"

Morley did stand back. Though the situation seemed to him almost ridiculous, there was force enough in it to compel him to change his style and tone:

"No harm done or meant, I hope," said he, with a grimace that must have been meant for a smile. "If you take it that way, sonny, I will let it drop. Your father was an old friend of mine. I have done something for him, and might have done more if he had lived, as I wish he had. What I was speaking of was only a bit of paper, and I don't care about it, anyhow."

"All right, mister," answered Sam, though he did not lower the revolver. "Is thar anythin' else you want to see or to know about here?"

"Well, sonny, I am a bit curious to know what brig, if it was a brig, got wrecked off here last night. Did nothing come ashore that could give her name? No boat or bucket, or anything like that?"

"Hain't seen nothin' o' the sort, mister."

"I believe I will take a look along the beach. If you care to help me, I will pay you for your help."

Morley walked along the beach, followed at a little distance by Sam Startle, who had replaced the revolver in his pocket, but kept his hand there, ready for any emergency.

His visitor seemed to pay no further attention to the boy, but tramped slowly over the sand, carefully examining every object of wreckage that came within his reach or his view.

At last a piece of plank near the edge of the surf attracted his attention, and he stepped down and picked it up.

It was a piece of black painted wood, showing the rough usage of the waves and rocks, and at one end broken and splintered, but with this much of lettering left in it in gilt, NETTE.

Evidently the lettering was part of the name that had been painted on the quarter of the ill-fated brig.

To Morley it was clearly a great prize.

Indeed, judging by the avidity with which he seized upon it, and the eagerness with which he gazed at it, there could scarcely have been a greater prize.

"Jeanette," he muttered. "That was the brigantine's name. Well, luck has set in my way, for sure."

"What you found thar, mister?" inquired Sam Startle.

"Only a bit of plank. Here it is. Did it come ashore last night?"

"Reckon it did, as I hain't seen nothin' like it afore now."

"May I have it?"

"Reckon you've got as good a right to it as anybody else, if not a better."

"I will take it, then, and that's all I want of you. Here's a dollar for you, sonny."

A dollar was a dollar, no matter from whom it might come, and Sam pocketed the coin as a matter of course.

At the same time it occurred to him that he might make Morley useful in another matter of business, and he did not hesitate to mention the subject.

"Say, mister, what had I better do about buryin' dad?"

"Why, just bury him dry so," brutally answered Morley. "Dig a hole in the sand at his side, and let him drop into it."

This suggestion made Sam so angry that he felt of the revolver in his pocket; but he compromised by "tackling" the stranger again when he had mounted his horse and was about to start for the main land.

"Say, mister, do you owe me anythin' more, or anybody else here?"

"Owe you anything? What do you mean?"

"Didn't know but you might ha' had some dealin's with dad that warn't settled up."

The visitor, with a savage oath, consigned Sam to an unmentionable region, and rode away.

The lad looked after him, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and planting his feet firmly on the sand.

"Dad told me to remember that cuss," said he, "and I will remember him as long as my name is Sam Startle, confound the mean, sneakin' soul of him! He said that dad had somethin' of his'n, and he wanted to look in his pockets to find it. Of course he lied, but I'd like to know what he wanted to git into those pockets fur. Reckon I'll have to look into 'em myself, funeral or no funeral."

The lad had vaguely connected the idea of a funeral with that of a coroner, and that with the supposed legal necessity of not touching the body until it should be seen by some person in authority; but there seemed to be an emergency that called for immediate action.

As for any aversion or fear in connection with handling the body or searching it, nothing of that kind worried him, and he set about his task in a cool and businesslike manner.

His search of the corpse was rewarded by the discovery of the roll of bills which Absalom had received from Morley, and his eyes opened wide as he counted it carefully.

"Five hundred dollars!" he exclaimed. "It's no wonder the crittur wanted to go through those pockets, and I'm durned glad he didn't git away with this stuff. Dad told me that he'd been hired to wreck that brig, and this must be what he got fur it. So it belonged to dad, and now it belongs to me. Well, it's a heap o' money."

Sam removed from the corpse everything of value that the pockets contained, covered it carefully with the old sail, and meditated as to what he should do next.

With five hundred dollars in his pocket he had no fears for his future; but the disposal of his father's body was a necessity of the present and a puzzle.

He went into the hut, knocked about there for a while without finding any occupation or suggestion, and was finally driven to the conclusion that the only thing for him to do was to leave the body there and go over to the main land to seek assistance or advice.

As he stepped outside to carry this intent into action, he was surprised by the sight of another horseman who was coming across the sandspit from over yonder.

"If that durned cuss is comin' back," muttered Sam, "thar'll somebody be dead afore he gits the money."

Naturally he supposed that Morley was returning, as he knew of nobody else who would be likely to visit the sandspit; but a brief inspection of the horseman convinced him that he was mistaken.

This man was riding slowly and looking about him, as if the scene was new to him and he wished to examine it thoroughly.

As soon as he caught sight of Sam he rode forward more rapidly, and it was soon evident that he was a very different person in appearance from the objectionable Morley.

He was a young man, perhaps ten years older than Sam, and was decidedly good-looking, with light-brown hair, bright blue eyes, a complexion that was fresh and clear in spite of the tan it had acquired.

He was dressed in a corduroy jacket, with trousers of the same stuffed into high boots, and his face was shaded by a broad felt hat.

He reined up his horse where Sam was standing and spoke to the lad without dismounting.

"Good-morning, my friend. Do you live here?"

"I did," answered Sam; "but I ain't agoin' to live here no longer."

"I was riding about the coast to get a little salt air to take the taste of the swamps out of my mouth, and this strip of sand looked so queer

that I wanted to examine it; but I did not expect to find anybody living here. What do you mean, sonny, when you say you are not going to live here any longer?"

"Well, mister, thar was a big storm last night, and a brig was wrecked on the reef off here, and dad he got killed when he was wrestling with a spar that came ashore, and thar ain't nobody but me now, and what's the use?"

The young man dismounted at once, hitched his horse, and asked Sam, with evidently honest expression of sympathy, to tell him all about it.

Sam Startle cheerfully complied with this request, and told the sad story of the night, carefully avoiding any mention of Morley, the buried box and the roll of money.

He was strongly attracted to this visitor by his appearance and his manner; but severe experience had taught him that he must not tell everything he knew—at least, not all at once.

"Was your father a wrecker here?" queried the visitor.

"Well, sorter in that line o' business, I reckon. Say, mister, you look as if you orter know things. I wish you'd tell me what I'd better do about dad."

"Do about him? What do you mean?"

"Well, he's dead, you know, and was killed in the way I told you about, and I thought mebber that I orter go over yonder and tell somebody and have somethin' done."

The stranger reflected upon the matter, considering the manner of the death of Absalom Startle and the circumstances of the lonely lad, and was brought to the conclusion that there was nothing in the affair that called for legal interference.

"I don't think that you need give yourself any uneasiness about that sort of thing," said he. "There is only one thing you need to do, and that is to give your father a decent burial. Of course you must bury him here, and if you should want to make a change afterward, it will be an easy thing to do. I will help you if you will have my help."

This was just what Sam wanted, and he gladly accepted the offer.

The body of Absalom Startle was carefully wrapped in the old sail, and was lowered into a hole dug in the sand where it lay, the hole being then filled up, and some heavy stones placed at the head of the mound as a monument.

Before the enshrouding was begun, the stranger asked Sam if it would not be well to examine the pockets of his father's clothes.

"I've tended to that," observed Sam.

"Well, you're a cool young customer. This sort of thing don't seem to worry you much."

"I've got to stand it. It had to be, I reckon. Dad was to'able tough, you see, and he raised me tough."

It was noon when this unpleasant task was finished, and Sam invited his new friend into the hut, where he prepared a dinner for both, which both ate heartily.

After dinner the visitor sat and smoked a cigar while he questioned Sam concerning his prospects and plans.

The lad had no definite plans, except that he was going to leave Danger Point, and that he meant to strike out for himself.

"Perhaps you had better go with me," suggested the other. "I can offer you a job that will give you board and lodging for awhile, anyhow."

"What lay are you on, mister?" inquired Sam, using the style of talk which he had learned from his father.

"I am a civil engineer—a surveyor, as some call it—and am surveying a lot of land over yonder on what is known as the Plympton property. I have a partner named August Engle, and we have Boney Priddle to help us, and I am sure we could find a use for a smart lad like you."

"What's your name?"

"Rush Powell. What is yours?"

"Sam Startle."

"Startle is a queer name. Seems to me that I have heard it somewhere. Well, Sam, what do you say to my offer?"

"All right, mister. If you'll take me, I'll go with you."

CHAPTER VI.

PARTNERS IN VILLAINY.

A LOW, one-storied, old-fashioned house at the edge of a grove of live oaks.

An outside chimney at each end and a very wide veranda in front, together with the broad and open hall, added to its peculiar old-fashioned and Southern appearance; but, in spite of its apparent age, the well-kept condition of the house gave it an air of comfort.

Very comfortable, too, looked a man who was seated alone on the veranda in a wide, hide-bottomed arm-chair, smoking a cob pipe with a long cane stem.

He was a man whose age might be anywhere between fifty and sixty and his red face and sandy hair, with the 'canny' expression of his countenance, were enough to cause him to be counted as a Scotchman.

Though apparently devoting himself to his comfort and his pipe, he was also looking down

the road, watching without seeming to watch a horseman who was approaching the house from that direction.

When the rider had dismounted and walked toward the veranda, he proved to be the Mr. Morley of Danger Point memory, and he carried in one hand the piece of splintered plank which had been picked up on the beach there by Sam Startle's objectionable visitor.

Gideon Scrooby, the comfortable man in the arm-chair, had been fully aware of the identity of this individual as soon as he caught sight of him, and had noted him narrowly as he came on, carefully scrutinizing every point of his bearing and demeanor.

Of course he perceived the bit of plank, and he could not have failed to notice the look of triumph that lighted up the man's dark countenance somewhat luridly.

Whatever his thoughts or feelings may have been, he seemed to take no special interest in the arrival, and did not rise from his chair to greet him.

"Is it really you, Mr. Plympton?" he said, speaking with an evident Scotch accent. "I hadn't looked for you so soon."

As the dark man had called himself Morley at Danger Point, and as Gideon Scrooby addressed him as Mr. Plympton, it is reasonable to infer that he was Morley Plympton, the graceless nephew of Benjamin Plympton, and the cousin of Absalom Startle's dead wife.

"Here I am, though," he answered, a little less gruffly than he was in the habit of speaking. "I got through with my business a little sooner than I expected to, and much easier than I had hoped."

He helped himself to a seat on the veranda, and laid across his knees the piece of plank, at which Gideon Scrooby looked inquisitively.

"Hey, mon, but that's good news," replied the Scotchman. "At least, I hope it's good news, for your sake. What's the bit of kindling-wood that you are toting about as if it was of some value?"

"This? Gideon Scrooby, this is proof."

"Proof, is it? And proof of what, then?"

"Proof that the job is done. Proof that what I wanted to happen has come to pass."

"And is that so? Well, Satan is a more accommodating fiend than I had given him credit for being. My idea of Auld Hornie was that he would lead a man on until he went his length in deviltry, and would then cheat him out of the fruits of it. Let me take a look at that bit of lumber."

Morley Plympton handed him the piece of plank, and the Scotchman inspected it closely.

"It does look like proof, though it might not be admitted as such in a court of justice. Pretty fair circumstantial evidence, though. The brigantine's name was Jeannette, and this fits it to a fraction, or with a fracture, as I may say. Are you sure, Mr. Plympton, that a vessel was wrecked last night off the place you spoke of?"

"I am sure of that, and am sure that this bit of plank came ashore from her, and that part of her name is on it."

"Well, sir, I must say that Satan moves in a wondrous way. Please tell me all about it, Mr. Plympton."

"That is what I came here for. But you must first give me something to wet my whistle, as I have had a long and dry ride."

"Maria!" yelled Scrooby, in a shrill voice, and a tall and fine-looking mulatto woman sailed through the hall as proudly as if she might have been the Queen of the Cannibal Islands.

At a word from Gideon Scrooby she brought out a small table with a bottle and some glasses, and placed the outfit on the veranda, retiring at a sign from the white man who was evidently her master.

"I don't mind if I take a wee drop with you, Mr. Plympton," said the Scotchman, "as a sort of foretaste of the good luck that's coming."

After he had helped himself liberally to the liquor, Morley Plympton proceeded to give an account of the "business" of which he had been speaking, concluding with his interview with Sam Startle that morning.

Scrooby said nothing until he mentioned the death of Absalom Startle, and then broke out with an interruption.

"Well, Satan is a friendly fiend when he gets his head that way. And so the man is dead. That is a good thing in more ways than one. It is a good thing to get rid of the evidence, or that much of the evidence. It is a good thing, too, in the way of money. You see that I was right, Mr. Plympton, when I told you that he would want part of the money down, and advised you to take that five hundred dollars."

"Yes, you were right there."

"And then you did a little thinking for yourself, I suppose. When you knew that he was dead, you reasoned that the money could be of no use to a corpse, and took it away from him."

"You are right as to the reasoning, Mr. Scrooby," answered Plympton, with a faint smile, "and that was just what I was going to do, when up started his son, with a revolver in his hand, and warned me off."

"Satan seems to have lost his grip just then."

H-m-m—a boy. Strange that the devil didn't prompt you to kill the cub and get him out of the way."

"I had the prompting, but was in a ticklish position, and thought I had better not go any further just then."

"I am afraid that you let a good chance slip. Well, you saved the other five hundred that I lent you, anyhow, and you may as well hand it back to me, I suppose."

"Why should I? I may need the money. You must consider yourself safe. My credit ought to be good now, I am sure."

"We will think about that. Go on with your story."

There was little more to tell and Morley Plympton soon finished the account of his interview with Sam Startle.

"I have succeeded," said he, "not only according to my calculations, but beyond my best expectations. The job is done, and the man is dead, and that gets rid of the evidence."

"Yes, as far as that goes. But I furnished the money to pay him, and my memory is not lost."

"You know nothing about my transactions with him, Scrooby, except what I have told you, and that would weigh little in a court of justice."

"Mighty little, I grant you, either there or elsewhere, and we are partners in this business to a certain extent, and I am not likely to go against my own interest. Well, Mr. Plympton, suppose we reckon the thing up as it stands, and satisfy ourselves as to where we stand."

"Go on and reckon it up, then."

"Well, sir, as the agent of your uncle's property here for several years—and a pretty big property it is, too—I have found it a profitable business, and naturally I want to keep hold of it. With you as the heir, I may expect to hold to it, as well as to get possession of this piece of ground, which you promised to secure to me if things should go to suit you."

"You may bet on both of those points as on a sure thing, Scrooby."

"I hope so, and in that hope I am helping you and mean to continue to help you. Well, Mr. Plympton, I take it for granted that you were speaking with real knowledge when you said that you knew the nature of the last will your uncle made just before he died in Cuba."

"No doubt of that, Scrooby. There can't be any doubt of it. I had the sharpest kind of a spy there, and he not only told me that, but gave me all the subsequent points, and the fate of the Jeannette is sufficient proof to me of his good faith."

"As you say, that is proof, and we may take it for granted that the will has ceased to exist."

"The man who started to bring that will to this country—the man who was the custodian of my uncle's secrets and his last wishes—has gone to the bottom of the sea with the Jeannette, and the will has gone there with him."

"And with him went, if I have understood the affair rightly, more or less of your uncle's portable property that had been intrusted to him. But that is a small matter, compared with the property that is not portable and that could never be lost at sea. So, my friend, since the man and the will have ceased to exist, you count yourself the heir to Benjamin Plympton's estates?"

"Of course I do," answered Morley, with an air of triumph. "It is all mine, and only a few legal formalities are needed to make my title absolute."

"There may be one other formality—perhaps a little more than a formality."

"What is that?"

"How about the boy?"

"The boy? What boy?"

"Benjamin Plympton's daughter's child—the son of your cousin—the lad you met at Danger Point—Samuel Startle by name."

"Heavens and earth! I hadn't thought of the brat in that way."

"What have you been doing with your wits, then?" sneered Gideon Scrooby.

"The fact is that I was so overjoyed at getting rid of his confounded father so nicely, that the peculiar position of the cub never occurred to me until you mentioned him."

"His position is peculiar, as you say. There being no will, or no longer any will, the property necessarily goes to the next of kin, and that is just what Absalom Startle's son happens to be."

"He knows nothing about it, and is not likely to find out anything about it."

"Don't be too sure of that, Morley Plympton. If he continues to knock about in this world, he will be likely to meet somebody who will tell him of it."

"He is an ignorant little brat, and has been brought up in poverty, leading a vagrant existence. He would never be able to prove his birth or anything of that sort."

"You can't afford to take any such risks, my friend. If he continues to knock about in this world, he may meet some smart lawyer who will be glad to supply all those needs."

"That makes twice that you have used that phrase, Gideon Scrooby, and I want to know what you mean by it."

to inspect the precious flasks and to give themselves personal assurance of the quality of their contents.

It was seldom that these remote denizens of the woods and swamps got a chance to taste liquor of any kind, and this supply was so potent and exhilarating that they could not get enough of it—to say nothing of too much—and they began their drinking as if they considered it a sacred duty to get away with the largest possible amount of it in the shortest possible time.

In this endeavor they were laudably assisted by their parents, who were so afraid that the whisky would all be disposed of before they could get their share, that they guzzled it without considering their capacity.

It was to be feared that the liquor would bring out their vicious tendencies and hasten the cruel fate of their captives; but the actual effect was to make them stupid and sleepy—indications which were joyfully observed by those most immediately concerned.

One by one they dropped off, the old woman falling first, then the old man, and then the two "boys" taking their turns in tumbling over on the dry grass of their pole beds.

This did not appear to promise much to the prisoners; but there is always hope while there is life, and, if they could manage to get loose and reach their rifles, they might yet be able to turn the tables on their foes.

To do this it was necessary for Powell to get his thongs within reach of Boney's teeth, and this was what they tried to do; but they soon perceived that the least movement they made was sufficient to arouse one of the boozy beasts, and they abandoned the effort in despair.

There was something else that aroused them.

Rush Powell after a while fancied that he heard a light step outside, and the sound, slight as it was, aroused both the young Hyleys.

"Wot's that?" growled one.

"Jest a 'gator," grunted the other, and the next minute they were both snoring.

But Rush Powell, who was near the thin wall of the shanty, was almost sure that he had heard a step.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PROFESSOR'S LUCK.

AUGUST ENGEL—the Professor, as Boney Priddle styled him—had bad luck with his deer-stalking that night.

He was inclined to attribute it to the fact that he had allowed Sam Startle to accompany him, and to regard the lad as his Jonah; but Sam had obeyed instructions so implicitly and faithfully, sticking closely to his heels, moving so silently and carefully, and never speaking above a whisper, that it was really impossible to put any of the blame upon him.

Besides, they had got so far from camp when the bad luck was fully developed, that the boy, if sent away, might not have been able to find his way back.

To kill a deer, it is first necessary to find your deer, and the professor and his follower wandered far and wide before they found a deer.

When they did find him, he was out of range, and they wandered further yet in the hope of getting a fair shot, as it was dead against August Engel's principles to wound a deer and let it get away to suffer.

The wary quadruped persisted in keeping out of the reach of a fair shot, and finally he abandoned the pursuit in despair and started to return to the camp.

This was not a difficult matter, in spite of the night and the forest, as the German was a thorough woodsman, and, as he had not gone far from the water, he had only to find it and follow it in order to be sure of his course.

In time they got back to the camp, only to find it deserted, with no sign remaining of the friends they had left there.

It needed but a slight inspection to enable August Engel to guess pretty accurately at what had happened.

"That dirty old beast who came to us at noon has made his threat good," said he. "He has had plenty of help, of course, and they have stolen on our friends while they were asleep and carried them away."

"They have robbed the camp, too," added Sam.

"Of course they have; but we are left, and the game is begun, but not yet ended. Our bad luck was good luck, Sammy, as it turns out. If I had fired a shot, it might have been heard here, and would have put those scoundrels on our trail. Then we might not be here now. Of course our friends would give them no hint to help them."

"They didn't kill Mr. Powell and Boney," suggested Sam.

"Not here, at least, and we must hope that they are still alive. What we have to do is to find them. Stay right where you are, Sam, and say nothing while I look for the trail."

There was light enough to enable Engel to make his search effective, and he soon found what he took to be the trail that led from the camp.

Beckoning to Sam to follow him, and the lad

silently obeying, he traced it down to the edge of the water.

There it ended, and the question was whether Powell and Boney had been thrown into the lagoon to feed the alligators, or had been carried away by some sort of water conveyance.

As the trail certainly stopped right there, and there was no branch from it in any direction, Engel was strongly drawn to the latter conclusion, especially when he noticed a disturbance of the bank which indicated that a craft of some kind had landed there.

He was pondering this subject when he heard the muttering of men's voices, and it needed but a second to convince him that the voices were not those of his friends.

Right there at the lagoon was the fallen trunk of an enormous cypress tree, which offered a good hiding-place.

Motioning to Sam to follow his example, the professor crouched down at the side of the fallen tree, and waited and listened.

Nothing more was heard of the voices until the men who owned them apparently reached the spot where the camp had been.

Then they spoke again, and Engel, who was not more than three rods away, could easily hear the most of what was said.

"Wal, they didn't come back yer'," said one, "and them we got told us the truth about 'em, I reckon. Shall we hunt any fuder?"

"Wot's the use? They ain't nowhar about yer', an' I'm gittin' tired an' sleepy. We toted some liquor off, too, an' mam an' pap 'll be fur drinkin' it all ef we don't git tear an' stop 'em. Let's poke along fur home."

"Is thar anythin' else about yer' that we want to tote off?"

"Thar ain't nothin' o' no 'count. We'll look it over in the mornin' when we come to hunt them two ag'in. Let's jest foller our noses to that whisky."

"All right; come along."

This conversation enabled August Engel to realize how narrowly he and Sam had escaped destruction.

If they had reached the camp a little later or somewhat sooner, they would have run against the two Hyleys who were searching for them, and would then, not suspecting any evil, have been taken at a disadvantage.

As he listened, there were two plans that presented themselves to the professor.

He might emerge from his concealment and open fire upon the prowlers, or might keep quiet and follow them when they went away.

The first plan might rid him of two adversaries, and the second might guide him to his friends.

He did not for an instant doubt his ability to "get away" with the two Hyleys, though, if he had been aware of their wildcat natures, he might have doubted it, even when he had the advantage of superior weapons and the first chance.

It was above all things important that he should know what had become of his friends, and therefore he adopted the plan of keeping quiet and using his foes as his guides.

He watched them as they walked away, and, as soon as he deemed it safe to do so, he rose and silently followed them, after whispering to Sam to come after him, but at a good distance behind, so as just to keep him in sight.

The prowlers themselves could not have moved more quietly than August Engel did; but they were not making any effort to be silent, as they had satisfied themselves that their prey was nowhere near them, and there was nothing to put into their heads a fancy that they might be followed.

So they went on in the night and in the forest, the Hyleys going carelessly in the advance, August Engel creeping silently after them, and just near enough to keep them in sight, and Sam Startle bringing up the rear at about an equal distance behind his leader.

The head of the procession halted at the edge of the lagoon after a walk of half an hour or so, and had no sooner halted than it disappeared.

Engel saw the two Crackers enter the ark that loomed up there in the darkness, and knew that he had reached the lair of the human wolves.

What should he do then?

Any hasty or ill-advised step might seal the fate of his friends if they were yet alive, and it would be better to move cautiously and slowly, to understand just what he had to do and how it was to be done, so that he could be sure of striking an effective blow.

He was creeping forward to reconnoiter the position of the enemy, when a transformation scene occurred—not a sudden transformation, but one that was sufficient to upset his plans as far as he had yet been able to form them.

The ark moved slowly and steadily away from the land, leaving a gradually increasing gap of dark and treacherous water between the professor and the object he was anxious to reach.

He saw a man and a woman standing on what might be called the guards of the craft, poling it out into the lagoon, and this told him that he would have four foes to contend with, provided that he should be able to hit upon a means of getting at them.

As he was crouched under the bushes, watching the receding ark, Sam Startle stole forward and joined him.

"Our friends must be prisoners on that raft, or whatever it is," whispered Engel.

"And we can't git at 'em," groaned Sam.

"I think I can."

"Only by swimmin', and the water's just alive with 'gators."

"I know all about that, and I know something else, too. Stay right here, my boy, and keep yourself hid, and watch that concern until I come back."

"Whar you goin'?"

"Back to the camp; but I will soon return, and I trust you to do just what I told you to do."

The professor made quick speed in the errand he had set himself to do, and when he got back he found Sam where he had been placed, and perceived that the ark was stationary in the middle of the lagoon.

He brought a bundle, tightly rolled and buckled, and not too big to be carried under his arm.

"The rascals missed this bit of my baggage," said he. "I noticed that they had overlooked it, and that is why I ran back and got it."

"What is it?" inquired Sam.

"Wait a few minutes, and you shall see. If those brutes could have guessed what it is, I would not have it now."

The professor unrolled his bundle, and shook out a mass of rubber-covered cloth, very fine but very strong.

Into this shapeless mass he sent his breath through a valve attached to it, and it speedily began to assume a shape that astonished Sam Startle.

He blew into another valve, and kept blowing, until what had been a small roll of rubber cloth took on the form and proportions of a canoe lifeboat.

It was a short craft, not over six feet long, but its width was nearly half its length, and it was a veritable lifeboat, incapable of sinking as long as the air was kept in, and of course of great buoyancy.

A few catches and rods were adjusted, and the canoe was complete and ready for service, even to a small but stout cord that served as a painter.

Only a paddle was needed, and Sam soon supplied that, cutting a branch with a bushy end from which he trimmed the leaves.

"Are you thinking of going with me, my boy?" inquired Engel.

"Why, yes. You can't get along without me. I'm a gay hand to paddle, and mebbe you'll have to work your rifle for all it's worth."

"I believe I can trust you, and the boat will carry us both if we are careful. Take off your shoes, Sammy, as there might be nails in them, and we must not tear the rubber."

Both took off their shoes and boots, and the boat was launched and loaded, the professor stationing himself on his knees at what may be called the bow, with his rifle in his hands, and Sam sitting at the stern to paddle.

After cautioning the paddler to do his work softly, Engel told him how to steer, and the canoe started.

It bore the weight easily, with its gunwale well above the water's edge, and Sam sent it through the water so noiselessly that it failed to arouse the attention of the alligators, if any were awake and in the neighborhood.

Indeed, the lad had not boasted when he declared himself "a gay hand to paddle," and it was impossible for August Engel to find the least fault with his style of managing the canoe.

Fully two hours had passed since they came in sight of the ark at the edge of the lagoon, and no sign of life was then to be seen or heard aboard of that strange craft.

The enterprise promised well thus far; but the real test would come when the logs were reached, and Engel gripped his rifle as he nerved himself for the desperate encounter that might be expected.

If he should not find his friends there, the conclusion would be that they had been killed, and then there would be nothing left but vengeance.

Sam paddled the canoe just as he had been told to, straight to the side of the raft, a little distance from the door at the end, and it touched the logs without the slightest sound or jar.

Engel rose slowly and carefully, straightened himself up, and stepped off upon the raft.

Sam quietly hastened to take his place at the bow and to make the canoe fast with the tiny painter.

The professor had not taken three steps with his stockinged feet toward the point he wished to reach, when he heard the muttering of voices within, and he stopped to listen.

The muttering subsided and snoring took its place, and he went on, but more cautiously, and if possible more silently, until he reached the always open door.

As he stood there, he saw by the dim light of the gourd lamp his four foes lying on the two beds, steeped in the fumes of liquor and stupefied

"He is more like a wild beast than a human being."

"Wot do you reckon he means to do, colonel?" inquired Boney.

"What can he do? Nothing, of course. He is only trying to scare us. This is not the first time we have struck that sort of thing."

"But this chap talks as if he means business, and I'm afraid he does."

"If it should come to a fight, Boney, we could get away with a regiment of such swamp suckers as he. I shall not give him another thought."

CHAPTER VIII.

PRISONED IN AN ARK.

EVENING found the surveying-party only a few miles from the place where they had halted at noon.

They had worked across the stretch of grassy plain, and had made their camp for the night in the forest beyond, near a lagoon similar to that at the other camp, but somewhat larger.

When they had eaten their supper, the men seated themselves to smoke their pipes, while Sam Startle cleaned up, that being part of the duties of which he had relieved Boney Priddle, greatly to the satisfaction of the fat man.

Sam had been accustomed to that kind of work, and he did it with a cheerful good will, as he had taken a great fancy to his new friends, and the life he led with them pleased him.

August Engel, when he had finished his smoke, picked up his rifle, and proposed to do a little deer-stalking on his own account, remarking that he thought he knew where he could find a deer.

As it was known that he preferred to be alone on such nocturnal excursions, nobody offered to accompany him except Sam, who had then completed his task, and who was excited by the mention of a deer-hunt.

"Mayn't I go with you, Mr. Engel?" he asked, almost piteously.

"I believe you may, my boy, as you are a quiet chap and I can trust you. But you must keep close to me, Sam, that I may not make the mistake of shooting you for a deer."

Sam promised to be careful, and followed Engel off into the woods along the edge of the lagoon.

Rush Powell and Boney, after chatting a little while, made a smudge to keep off the insects, wrapped themselves in their blankets, and were soon sound asleep on the ground.

August might be absent the greater part of the night, as deer-stalking was a passion with him, and they had no idea of keeping awake for him, as it would be bad enough to be awoken by him when he got back.

Still less did they worry about Abe Hyley and his crew, as Powell had dismissed the Cracker from his mind, and even Boney had forgotten him for a while.

An hour or so passed, and they were in the land of dreams, when four figures stole toward them through the forest, ghost-like in their movements and as noiseless as night birds.

Of what use were magazine rifles to sleeping men, and what strength and skill could avail against that silent approach of the wild beasts of the woods?

The beasts were Abe Hyley, his two stalwart sons, and his wife, who was as good a man as either of the others, if not a little more so.

After silently stealing up on the sleepers, and carefully spying about for their comrades, the prowlers made their pounce.

Rush Powell and Boney Priddle were aroused at the same instant and in the same manner.

They awoke to find themselves in the grasp and under the knees of their half-savage foes, and their stoutest struggles could not prevent them from being secured and bound with thongs.

Thus placed beyond the possibility of escape, they were raised to a sitting posture and permitted to see their captors and survey the situation.

There was light enough to enable them to perceive that the leader of their assailants was Abe Hyley, and that was enough to inform them of the character of his companions.

"So you have worked your scheme," calmly observed Powell as soon as he could recover his breath. "What are you going to do with us, now that you have got us?"

"You'll know that soon enough," observed the Cracker. "Whar's t'others?"

"Gone away," promptly answered Powell, "and they are far from here by this time."

It occurred to him that he and Boney were in a serious scrape, and he was determined to keep Engel and Sam out of it if he could.

No doubt the Hyleys were convinced that the other two were nowhere near the camp, as their catlike spying had not been for nothing.

"They'll be comin' back afore long," remarked the leader, "and then I'll git 'em."

Powell was afraid just then that they might be coming back a little too soon and too incautiously, and for their sake he was glad to see the Cracker crew making hasty preparations for departure.

The woman and one of the young men took the captured rifles, the surveying instruments, and as much of the camp outfit as they could conveniently carry, and started off through the woods.

Abe Hyley and his other son made the prisoners rise, and marched them away pretty rapidly after the others.

Southward they went, and across a bend formed by the lagoon, which they struck about half a mile further down.

Against the bank—if that could be called a bank where the water was nearly level with the land—lay the queerest craft that Rush Powell had ever seen, and it may be doubted if Boney Priddle had met its equal.

It was a raft of heavy logs, on which was built a low shanty of light material, a space or gangway of some three feet of logs being left on each side of the structure.

It was a very rude affair, with an appearance of dirt and antiquity that was far from pleasant, and was so low, perhaps because of the water-soaking of the logs, that it was but little above the edge of the lagoon.

The shanty had no windows, and but one door, at the end, which then pointed northward.

The two prisoners were marched aboard the raft and into the shanty, while the woman and her son followed with the "plunder."

When they had got inside of the structure, they perceived that it was quite as queer as the outside, and yet more filthy and disgusting.

It was dimly lighted by two wicks swimming in a gourd of grease, and by this feeble illumination they could see that there was but a single apartment, in which were two beds, such as they were, rudely constructed of poles covered with dry grass.

In the further end was a small fireplace of baked earth, from which a short chimney of sticks and clay made a connection with the outer air.

There was no other furniture, unless a few "chunks" of wood to serve as seats and a number of skins scattered about could be so called.

Near the fireplace hung pieces of dried meat, and the odor from them and from the skins was alike unpleasant.

In fact, the smell of the entire establishment was disgusting, and the shanty, though evidently the work of hands, was more like a lair of wild beasts than an abode of human beings.

Seated on two of the "chunks," the prisoners noted, as their position compelled them to, everything about the establishment that was within range of their vision.

They especially noted the fact that the two young Hyleys, as soon as they had assisted in bringing the prisoners and plunder aboard, went back ashore, and did not return.

It was easy to guess that they had gone in search of August Engel and Sam Startle.

Powell and Boney naturally hoped that their friends might not find the prowling Crackers, not only for their own sakes, but because the prisoners must rely upon them for deliverance, if any deliverance should prove to be possible.

If they should come to the right conclusion concerning the condition of affairs, and should use a fair amount of caution and skill, they might be able to work no little havoc among the Hyleys, provided that they should be able to get at the ark.

This proviso was the real stumbling block, and the last hope of the prisoners was soon upset by the proceedings of the Hyleys.

Abe Hyley and his wife went outside, cast the raft loose from the shore, and poled it out into the sluggish water of the dark lagoon.

This was slow work, but the Crackers were in no hurry, and every now and then they stopped to rap the nose of a too familiar alligator that shoved his snout up on the logs.

"That knocks us cold," whispered Powell to his companion. "If our friends are safe, and if they should find us, they would never be able to get at us while this confounded contraption is off on the water."

"If they should try it, the 'gators would make short work of them," answered Boney. "But I hope that they will keep out of the way and save their own skins."

As the chance of a rescue faded away, they made such efforts as they might to release themselves from their unpleasant and perilous predicament.

They attempted, and not for the first time, to untie or loosen the thongs with which their hands were bound, but found it impossible to make any impression upon them.

If they could get loose, they believed that they would be able to give a good account of themselves in a conflict with the two Crackers who remained on the raft.

Rush Powell turned to Boney and offered his thoughts to the teeth of his friend, who was beginning to gnaw them when Abe Hyley suddenly looked in and stopped the performance.

To prevent a recurrence of the endeavor, he moved his two prisoners into opposite corners of the apartment, placing Powell where he could watch him while he poled.

It was evident that the ark was to be taken to a considerable distance from the spot where the

prisoners had boarded it, as it continued to move down the lagoon slowly but steadily, and nothing was to be heard but the usual sounds of the night, the splashing of the poles in the water, and the occasional curses or mutterings of the man and woman outside.

After an hour and more of this style of traveling the concern came to a halt at the edge of the lagoon, a fact which was made evident to the prisoners by the jar as it struck against the bank.

Again their spirits rose, as it was possible that their friends might find and help them, and there was at least a chance of rescue as long as they were linked to the land.

Abe Hyley and his wife put up their poles, made the raft fast to the bank, and came inside.

Rush Powell immediately started a conversation with the old brute in as friendly a tone as he could assume.

"Mr. Hyley, have you landed here to wait for your two boys?"

"Wal, mebbe—kinder so, I reckon. What's that your business?"

"Did they go ashore to look for our friends?"

"Yes, an' they'll git 'em, too."

"I doubt it. They will have a long hunt, as our friends are far from here."

"They'll git 'em, anyhow. We've got to git the hull batch, dead or alive, an' we mean ter."

"Will you kindly inform me, Mr. Hyley, what you intend to do with us, now that you've got us?"

The male Cracker significantly drew his hand across his throat.

"Ain't that so, Rhody?" he added, turning to his wife.

"Stick 'em like pigs!" grunted the woman.

This was decidedly an unpleasant prospect, as the prisoners could not doubt that the brutes meant what they said.

It was bad enough to die; but to be slaughtered by these dirty beasts was even worse than falling into the jaws of alligators.

Therefore the prisoners, not knowing when their time might come, carefully noted the movements of the two Crackers.

Their attention was turned to the captured rifles, which they handled together, evidently desiring to find out how the magazines worked; but the machinery was too much for them, and the cartridges they did not understand at all.

They threw out several hints with the object of inducing the prisoners to explain the operations of the weapons; but the prisoners were not in that line of business.

"You had better be careful how you fool with those new-fangled fixin's," was all they got out of Rush Powell.

"You'd better be keeful how you fool with your lip, young man," gruffly answered the Cracker. "You mought git off a leetle easier by bein' civil, mebbe."

"We have got to go, anyhow," suggested Powell.

"Yes, an' the fat cuss thar that sassed me has got to go fu'st."

The ark had not lain long at the second landing when the two young Hyleys came aboard, and they came alone, greatly to the satisfaction of Powell and Boney, who had not ceased to fear for the fate of their friends.

"Didn't you git 'em, then?" growled the old man.

"Nary git," answered one of the young brutes. "They-uns ain't nowhar about yer."

"So these cusses spoke the truth. Well, they've got to come back, an' we'll git 'em in the mornin'."

The arrival of the younger Hyleys was the signal for another move, and their precious parents cast off the raft again and navigated it out into the lagoon, where they anchored it pretty securely with their poles, though there was no current that was likely to stir it.

At this point the lagoon was so wide that it assumed the appearance of a lake, and the prisoners could see enough through the open door to enable them to judge that they were finally located at a considerable distance from the shore.

Again their spirits sunk, and the mercury of their hopes ran down several degrees below zero.

Whatever August Engel might want to do—and his friends knew him to be both willing and skillful—it was out of the question that he should be able to reach them, as the lagoon swarmed with alligators that were easily aroused, if not always awake and ready for business.

This point being settled, the prisoners had only to watch the proceedings of their captors and make such calculation as they could concerning the time and manner of their own exit from this world.

At the captured camp had been several flasks of whisky, being a supply lately received by the surveying party "for mechanical purposes," which had scarcely been touched.

This portion of the plunder had not been overlooked by the Crackers, who had carried it away and brought it aboard the ark, where it had been examined and sampled rather freely by the elder Hyleys during the absence of the "boys."

On the arrival of the latter they hastened

to inspect the precious flasks and to give themselves personal assurance of the quality of their contents.

It was seldom that these remote denizens of the woods and swamps got a chance to taste liquor of any kind, and this supply was so potent and exhilarating that they could not get enough of it—to say nothing of too much—and they began their drinking as if they considered it a sacred duty to get away with the largest possible amount of it in the shortest possible time.

In this endeavor they were laudably assisted by their parents, who were so afraid that the whisky would all be disposed of before they could get their share, that they guzzled it without considering their capacity.

It was to be feared that the liquor would bring out their vicious tendencies and hasten the cruel fate of their captives; but the actual effect was to make them stupid and sleepy—indications which were joyfully observed by those most immediately concerned.

One by one they dropped off, the old woman falling first, then the old man, and then the two "boys" taking their turns in tumbling over on the dry grass of their pole beds.

This did not appear to promise much to the prisoners; but there is always hope while there is life, and, if they could manage to get loose and reach their rifles, they might yet be able to turn the tables on their foes.

To do this it was necessary for Powell to get his thongs within reach of Boney's teeth, and this was what they tried to do; but they soon perceived that the least movement they made was sufficient to arouse one of the boozy beasts, and they abandoned the effort in despair.

There was something else that aroused them. Rush Powell after a while fancied that he heard a light step outside, and the sound, slight as it was, aroused both the young Hyleys.

"Wot's that?" growled one.

"Jest a 'gator," grunted the other, and the next minute they were both snoring.

But Rush Powell, who was near the thin wall of the shanty, was almost sure that he had heard a step.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PROFESSOR'S LUCK.

AUGUST ENGEL—the Professor, as Boney Priddle styled him—had bad luck with his deer-stalking that night.

He was inclined to attribute it to the fact that he had allowed Sam Startle to accompany him, and to regard the lad as his Jonah; but Sam had obeyed instructions so implicitly and faithfully, sticking closely to his heels, moving so silently and carefully, and never speaking above a whisper, that it was really impossible to put any of the blame upon him.

Besides, they had got so far from camp when the bad luck was fully developed, that the boy, if sent away, might not have been able to find his way back.

To kill a deer, it is first necessary to find your deer, and the professor and his follower wandered far and wide before they found a deer.

When they did find him, he was out of range, and they wandered further yet in the hope of getting a fair shot, as it was dead against August Engel's principles to wound a deer and let it get away to suffer.

The wary quadruped persisted in keeping out of the reach of a fair shot, and finally he abandoned the pursuit in despair and started to return to the camp.

This was not a difficult matter, in spite of the night and the forest, as the German was a thorough woodsman, and, as he had not gone far from the water, he had only to find it and follow it in order to be sure of his course.

In time they got back to the camp, only to find it deserted, with no sign remaining of the friends they had left there.

It needed but a slight inspection to enable August Engel to guess pretty accurately at what had happened.

"That dirty old beast who came to us at noon has made his threat good," said he. "He has had plenty of help, of course, and they have stolen on our friends while they were asleep and carried them away."

"They have robbed the camp, too," added Sam.

"Of course they have; but we are left, and the game is begun, but not yet ended. Our bad luck was good luck, Sammy, as it turns out. If I had fired a shot, it might have been heard here, and would have put those scoundrels on our trail. Then we might not be here now. Of course our friends would give them no hint to help them."

"They didn't kill Mr. Powell and Boney," suggested Sam.

"Not here, at least, and we must hope that they are still alive. What we have to do is to find them. Stay right where you are, Sam, and say nothing while I look for the trail."

There was light enough to enable Engel to make his search effective, and he soon found what he took to be the trail that led from the camp.

Beckoning to Sam to follow him, and the lad

silently obeying, he traced it down to the edge of the water.

There it ended, and the question was whether Powell and Boney had been thrown into the lagoon to feed the alligators, or had been carried away by some sort of water conveyance.

As the trail certainly stopped right there, and there was no branch from it in any direction, Engel was strongly drawn to the latter conclusion, especially when he noticed a disturbance of the bank which indicated that a craft of some kind had landed there.

He was pondering this subject when he heard the muttering of men's voices, and it needed but a second to convince him that the voices were not those of his friends.

Right there at the lagoon was the fallen trunk of an enormous cypress tree, which offered a good hiding-place.

Motioning to Sam to follow his example, the professor crouched down at the side of the fallen tree, and waited and listened.

Nothing more was heard of the voices until the men who owned them apparently reached the spot where the camp had been.

Then they spoke again, and Engel, who was not more than three rods away, could easily hear the most of what was said.

"Wal, they didn't come back yer," said one, "and them we got told us the truth about 'em, I reckon. Shall we hunt any furdur?"

"Wot's the use? They ain't nowhar about yer, an' I'm gittin' tired an' sleepy. We toted some liquor off, too, an' mam an' pap 'll be fur drinkin' it all ef we don't git thar an' stop 'em. Let's poke along fur home."

"Is thar anythin' else about yer' that we want to tote off?"

"Thar ain't nothin' o' no 'count. We'll look it over in the mornin' when we come to hunt them two ag'in. Let's jest foller our noses to that whisky."

"All right; come along."

This conversation enabled August Engel to realize how narrowly he and Sam had escaped destruction.

If they had reached the camp a little later or somewhat sooner, they would have run against the two Hyleys who were searching for them, and would then, not suspecting any evil, have been taken at a disadvantage.

As he listened, there were two plans that presented themselves to the professor.

He might emerge from his concealment and open fire upon the prowlers, or might keep quiet and follow them when they went away.

The first plan might rid him of two adversaries, and the second might guide him to his friends.

He did not for an instant doubt his ability to "get away" with the two Hyleys, though, if he had been aware of their wildcat natures, he might have doubted it, even when he had the advantage of superior weapons and the first chance.

It was above all things important that he should know what had become of his friends, and therefore he adopted the plan of keeping quiet and using his foes as his guides.

He watched them as they walked away, and, as soon as he deemed it safe to do so, he rose and silently followed them, after whispering to Sam to come after him, but at a good distance behind, so as just to keep him in sight.

The prowlers themselves could not have moved more quietly than August Engel did; but they were not making any effort to be silent, as they had satisfied themselves that their prey was nowhere near them, and there was nothing to put into their heads a fancy that they might be followed.

So they went on in the night and in the forest, the Hyleys going carelessly in the advance, August Engel creeping silently after them, and just near enough to keep them in sight, and Sam Startle bringing up the rear at about an equal distance behind his leader.

The head of the procession halted at the edge of the lagoon after a walk of half an hour or so, and had no sooner halted than it disappeared.

Engel saw the two Crackers enter the ark that loomed up there in the darkness, and knew that he had reached the lair of the human wolves.

What should he do then?

Any hasty or ill-advised step might seal the fate of his friends if they were yet alive, and it would be better to move cautiously and slowly, to understand just what he had to do and how it was to be done, so that he could be sure of striking an effective blow.

He was creeping forward to reconnoiter the position of the enemy, when a transformation scene occurred—not a sudden transformation, but one that was sufficient to upset his plans as far as he had yet been able to form them.

The ark moved slowly and steadily away from the land, leaving a gradually increasing gap of dark and treacherous water between the professor and the object he was anxious to reach.

He saw a man and a woman standing on what might be called the guards of the craft, poling it out into the lagoon, and this told him that he would have four foes to contend with, provided that he should be able to hit upon a means of getting at them.

As he was crouched under the bushes, watching the receding ark, Sam Startle stole forward and joined him.

"Our friends must be prisoners on that raft, or whatever it is," whispered Engel.

"And we can't git at 'em," groaned Sam.

"I think I can."

"Only by swimmin', and the water's just alive with 'gators."

"I know all about that, and I know something else, too. Stay right here, my boy, and keep yourself hid, and watch that concern until I come back."

"Whar you goin'?"

"Back to the camp; but I will soon return, and I trust you to do just what I told you to do."

The professor made quick speed in the errand he had set himself to do, and when he got back he found Sam where he had been placed, and perceived that the ark was stationary in the middle of the lagoon.

He brought a bundle, tightly rolled and buckled, and not too big to be carried under his arm.

"The rascals missed this bit of my baggage," said he. "I noticed that they had overlooked it, and that is why I ran back and got it."

"What is it?" inquired Sam.

"Wait a few minutes, and you shall see. If those brutes could have guessed what it is, I would not have it now."

The professor unrolled his bundle, and shook out a mass of rubber-covered cloth, very fine but very strong.

Into this shapeless mass he sent his breath through a valve attached to it, and it speedily began to assume a shape that astonished Sam Startle.

He blew into another valve, and kept blowing, until what had been a small roll of rubber cloth took on the form and proportions of a canoe lifeboat.

It was a short craft, not over six feet long, but its width was nearly half its length, and it was a veritable lifeboat, incapable of sinking as long as the air was kept in, and of course of great buoyancy.

A few catches and rods were adjusted, and the canoe was complete and ready for service, even to a small but stout cord that served as a painter.

Only a paddle was needed, and Sam soon supplied that, cutting a branch with a bushy end from which he trimmed the leaves.

"Are you thinking of going with me, my boy?" inquired Engel.

"Why, yes. You can't get along without me. I'm a gay hand to paddle, and mebbe you'll have to work your rifle for all it's worth."

"I believe I can trust you, and the boat will carry us both if we are careful. Take off your shoes, Sammy, as there might be nails in them, and we must not tear the rubber."

Both took off their shoes and boots, and the boat was launched and loaded, the professor stationing himself on his knees at what may be called the bow, with his rifle in his hands, and Sam sitting at the stern to paddle.

After cautioning the paddler to do his work softly, Engel told him how to steer, and the canoe started.

It bore the weight easily, with its gunwale well above the water's edge, and Sam sent it through the water so noiselessly that it failed to arouse the attention of the alligators, if any were awake and in the neighborhood.

Indeed, the lad had not boasted when he declared himself "a gay hand to paddle," and it was impossible for August Engel to find the least fault with his style of managing the canoe.

Fully two hours had passed since they came in sight of the ark at the edge of the lagoon, and no sign of life was then to be seen or heard aboard of that strange craft.

The enterprise promised well thus far; but the real test would come when the logs were reached, and Engel gripped his rifle as he nerved himself for the desperate encounter that might be expected.

If he should not find his friends there, the conclusion would be that they had been killed, and then there would be nothing left but vengeance.

Sam paddled the canoe just as he had been told to, straight to the side of the raft, a little distance from the door at the end, and it touched the logs without the slightest sound or jar.

Engel rose slowly and carefully, straightened himself up, and stepped off upon the raft.

Sam quietly hastened to take his place at the bow and to make the canoe fast with the tiny painter.

The professor had not taken three steps with his stockinged feet toward the point he wished to reach, when he heard the muttering of voices within, and he stopped to listen.

The muttering subsided and snoring took its place, and he went on, but more cautiously, and if possible more silently, until he reached the always open door.

As he stood there, he saw by the dim light of the gourd lamp his four foes lying on the two beds, steeped in the fumes of liquor and stupefied

into a slumber from which they might easily be awakened.

He also saw his two friends, bound and seated in opposite corners of the dingy apartment, and they saw him and recognized him at once as the gleam fell on his glasses.

He held up a warning finger, brought his magazine rifle to a level, and opened fire.

There was no thought of mercy to man or woman—no intention of giving anybody a chance for his life—only the knowledge that a den of wild beasts was there, and that the quickest way was the best.

Utter extermination of the Hyleys was his only chance for saving the lives of Sam and himself, as well as the lives of his friends.

The first click of the rifle's lock aroused one of the young Hyleys, and he received the first bullet as he started up.

The first shot was also a signal for Sam.

He had been kneeling in the bow of the canoe, clutching his father's revolver, with one hand on the raft, waiting for the work to begin, and fully determined to take part in the expected collision.

Knowing well the music of the professor's rifle, he sprang aboard at the first report, and a few quick steps took him around the corner of the shanty and in at the door.

It was well that he arrived when he did, as Engel had on his hands a somewhat heavier contract than he could execute, his rifle being too unwieldy a weapon for such close quarters.

He had settled the cases of the two "boys" in one-two time as they rose before him; but Abe Hyley and the woman had jumped up and started for him before he could turn to meet them.

Sam Startle supplied the element that was lacking, and his revolver spoke so quickly and effectively that there was no chance to talk back.

This ended the battle, which was more like a massacre than a fight, and when the smoke had cleared away the professor satisfied himself that the Hyley family would never again attempt to amuse themselves by the slaughter of surveying parties.

Sam busied himself with releasing the two prisoners, who were thankful enough for the deliverance that had come to them.

"You made short work of it, August," observed Powell.

"It was necessary, my boy. When you have to deal with tigers, you must become a tiger. I suppose they intended to kill you."

"That is what they said, and I have no doubt they meant it."

"So it was our lives or theirs, and we came out ahead, fortunately for us. If we had found you dead, I would have done just the same, as I had no more hesitation about killing those creatures than if they had been a nest of moccasin snakes. But I am afraid I would have got more than I bargained for, if it had not been for Sam."

"I noticed his work, and saw that he was the right fellow in the right place. What shall we do with the remnants? Feed them to the alligators?"

"I would not so insult the saurians. We will shove this raft to the shore, put a pile of dry brushwood in here, and give the whole outfit to the flames."

That was what was done, and when the surveying party returned to their camp they walked by the light of a big bonfire that was floating out upon the lagoon.

CHAPTER X.

PLUCKY EVA TREMPER.

ABOUT a dozen miles from Gideon Scrooby's habitation was a house that was yet more ancient and old-fashioned than his, but not in near as good condition.

It had been a mansion in its time, and was still entitled to be called a mansion, but had become so worn and dilapidated and thoroughly out at elbows, that its former grandeur was merely a reproach to it.

It was pleasantly situated on the crest of a rise in the rolling ground, and was surrounded by fertile fields, and its grounds had been more than beautiful in the days of its prosperity.

They were still beautiful, but with a wild, tropical and utterly unkempt luxuriance that promised to relegate them to their original untamed condition, unless some person who was willing and able to care for them should take compassion on them.

The mansion was low, but large and roomy, with an abundance of doors and windows to admit the air, and with a broad veranda all around it, furnished with venetian blinds that could be raised or lowered to suit the convenience of the inmates.

That is to say, they were intended to be so used; but that portion of the establishment, like all the other visible portions, was sadly rusty, broken, and generally out of gear.

To a stranger approaching the mansion from the front the cause of this decay might have been perceived in an old gentleman who was slowly coming around the side of the house.

Colonel Tremper, old and gray before his

time, though still possessing a decidedly military air, shambled over the ground as if he was afraid to trust his legs, and his general appearance was as rusty and dilapidated as the worst portions of his mansion or estate.

He had not always been thus; but the war had upset him physically and mentally, impairing his manhood and destroying his usefulness.

He had fought gallantly for the Lost Cause, and his only son had been killed in following his example, and his wife had died when he was far from her.

At the close of the contest he had come home to find himself stripped of all his possessions but his bare acres. Slavery was at an end, and without his "niggers" he saw no way of working or managing his plantation.

So he gave it all up as a bad job, let everything go at loose ends, and gave himself up to a vice which, though not contracted in the army, had there been given its swing until it gained complete control of him.

It was generally said by his acquaintances of those days that Martin Tremper was never known to draw a sober breath.

He still pretended to manage the plantation; but the management was of a slipshod kind that cost more than it produced, and of late years he had been living on the proceeds of a mortgage given to a wealthy Northern man who had purchased large tracts of land in Florida.

His daughter Eva, who was just then on the veranda, differed from him as a perfect picture of youth and health and beauty must differ from a dissipated and dilapidated old man.

A child when he went away to the war, she had become a woman of twenty, glorious in a queenly beauty about which men might well rave, though there were few in that remote region to rave about it.

She was seated on the veranda in an ancient arm-chair, her head resting on one white hand with which her black hair contrasted vividly, and her dark eyes were turned toward the road, down which she was gazing like Mariana in the Moated Grange, as if looking for some one who "cometh not."

Colonel Tremper shambled toward the part of the veranda where she was seated, announcing his approach by some hoarse noises in his throat, and there was a silly simper in his face as he spoke to her.

"Well, Eva dear, you are looking out, I see. Watching for him, hey?"

A sudden blush mantled her face, as if she might really have been watching for somebody, but it passed away at once, and she answered coldly:

"I don't know what you mean, sir. For whom should I be waiting?"

"Why, for Morley Plympton, of course. I am expecting him to-day. Didn't I tell you?"

"I am thankful to you for not having told me that, as the day would then have been much less pleasant to me than it has been."

"I hope that you don't mean to say that you would dislike to see him."

"You know it without my saying so. There is no person whom I would more dislike to see. He has been here too often, and I wish I might never see him again."

"Now, Eva, please don't say that. He just dotes on you, and that is what brings him here so often. He is a rich man now, too. His uncle is dead, and Morley is the heir to all the Plympton property, here and elsewhere."

"If he owned the whole earth," bitterly answered Eva, "I would hope to find some corner under the earth where he could never come."

"Why, Eva, I hope you don't want me to think you hate him, when he dotes on you so."

"Mr. Plympton is an unpleasant subject to me, father, and I wish you would drop it."

"But I can't drop him, my child. I am so mixed up with him, and he has got such a hold on me, that there's no such thing as letting go. His uncle had a mortgage on this plantation, and I am told that it is due and that there is ever so much interest unpaid. Somehow I can't keep the run of such things."

"I think you could, father, if you tried. I believe that I could do something with the place, if you would let me manage it."

"As if a girl could do anything. Nobody could bring it out from under that mortgage. Morley Plympton owns the mortgage now, and he can sell us out if he wants to. What would become of you, my child, when I am gone?"

Eva shrugged her shoulders, as if she fancied that she was not likely to be much worse off than she then was.

"If the plantation should be sold away from us, Eva, what would you do?"

"That does not worry me a bit, father. I have no fear for my future. I would make my way in the world."

"Dear me, dear me! Life seems so easy to young people who have everything provided for them and no care on their minds. How different it is with the old! What do you suppose would become of your poor old father, Eva? You ought to have a little consideration for him. You have a chance, Eva—a chance that any other girl would jump at—to save us from all

that trouble, and to marry a rich man, a *very* rich man. He dotes on you, and I don't see why he should not make you a good husband, or why you should not be fond of him."

"I would rather have a pet alligator. There he comes, father, and I will leave you to enjoy his society."

Colonel Tremper begged his daughter to remain, and she finally consented to do so.

Morley Plympton rode up to the house, where he received a warm welcome from the one and a cool reception from the other.

After a few words with the visitor, Colonel Tremper made a lame excuse, and left the others together, Eva offering no objection to this arrangement, as she was a proud and high-spirited girl, quite able to hold her own, and perhaps the present was as good a time as any to "have it out" with her obnoxious suitor.

She did "have it out" with him, much to his sorrow, and more to his indignation.

As she suspected, Morley Plympton had come there to make her a formal offer of marriage, and he bungled the job badly, receiving no aid from the lady, who persisted in misunderstanding his motive, and possessing himself none of the gentlemanly instincts that might have enabled him to do the job neatly and smooth over obstacles.

When he at last succeeded in declaring his purpose plainly, his proposal met a complete and utter rejection—not contemptuous, but ladylike, cool and positive, leaving no chance for doubt that the speaker was sure of her own mind and was not afraid to show it.

Perhaps Plympton would have preferred that his rejection, if he must be rejected, should be accompanied by indignation or some show of emotion; but her cool and matter-of-fact manner simply assured him that she took no interest in him whatever.

Holding in his temper as well as he could, he asked her reasons for rejecting him; but Eva Tremper did not care to give them.

She might have said that he was old enough to be her father; that there was nothing about him to touch the heart of a woman; that he was ugly to look at, and that his disposition was such as to make him both feared and despised; but she preferred not to go into those and other particulars.

"Only that I do not wish to marry you, and do not intend to," she quietly answered. "That is all, and under no circumstances would I say anything else."

Morley Plympton held a great advantage over her, or believed that he held it, not only in his position as a man of property, but in his power over the Tremper estate.

He had supposed that Colonel Tremper would have explained this important matter to the young lady, and thus the way would be made clear for him; but the "old fool," he fancied, had not done his duty in that respect, and had left the explanation to him.

He had no delicate feelings or scruples of honor about making it and putting it in such a shape that it could not fail to be understood.

Therefore he proceeded to do so, bluntly and brutally, and concluded his statement of the case by offering himself as the only refuge the Trempers could find between them and utter pecuniary ruin.

Even this did not stir the girl to indignation, or move her from the cool and indifferent attitude she had assumed at the beginning of the interview.

She spoke plainly and to the purpose.

"Now we know just where we stand, Mr. Plympton, and I may say for you that you are not a bit meaner than I had supposed you to be. Those matters of which you speak I had understood pretty well before you mentioned them—at least, as well as my father could explain them to me—and I can assure you that what you have said does not incline me to make the least change in the answer I have given you. So you may go and do your worst."

"I don't mean to make any threats, Miss Tremper."

"I believe I know what you mean. I have read in novels of girls whose fathers have been in difficulties—there was always a mortgage, or a note, or something of the sort, that brought on the difficulties—and those girls, to get their foolish and selfish fathers out of trouble, were willing to sacrifice themselves and spoil their entire lives by marrying men whom they hated or despised. For my part, I must say that I pity the stuff of which those young women were made, and that there is no such material in my composition. I am not willing to make such a sacrifice of myself, even for my father. If we must give up this plantation—and really, Mr. Plympton, it seems to be scarcely worth saving—I feel sure that I can take care of myself, and that I can take care of my father, too."

Morley Plympton boiled up and boiled over.

He had it in him to say something mean, and said the meanest thing he could think of.

"Of course you have a lover, then, Miss Tremper," he remarked, with a sneer.

Even this did not stir her to wrath, and she answered him as calmly as ever.

"There is no of course about it, sir. You

may suppose so if you want to. I don't care what you suppose."

"I know who it is, too. It is that beggarly surveyor, my servant, Rush Powell."

Then Eva Tremper did flare up, and her style of flaring up was an admission that her antagonist had spoken the truth; but perhaps she did not care for that.

"Your servant?" she replied, fiercely, flashing her dark eyes upon the mean face of her foe. "You know better than that, sir. Whatever he may be to me, Rush Powell is no man's servant. He gives you the work of his hand and his brain, and you give him your money. That is a fair exchange, and I would be willing to warrant that he has not the best of the bargain. Your servant, indeed! You might be proud to call yourself his servant."

"That settles it, Miss Tremper. I perceive that I do know who the favored person is. I shall discharge him from my service, and he will miss my dollars. You may tell your father that in that other matter the law will have to take its course. Good day."

Morley Plympton mounted his horse hastily, and rode away without another word.

Eva Tremper was glad to see him go; but the encounter had taxed her strength, and she was nearly ready to sink when her father shambled to her again, with a look of woe on his flabby face.

"What made Mr. Plympton hurry away?" he hoarsely demanded. "I hope, Eva, that you have not offended him."

"He asked me to marry him, and I refused to do so."

"Mercy on us! We are ruined!"

"I think we are saved from a great calamity."

CHAPTER XI.

RUSH POWELL STRIKES A LEAD.

MORLEY PLYMPTON rode away with his heart full of hatred and mean resolves, and both his hatred and his resolves were intensified when he had got out of the Tremper grounds and was riding down the road out of sight of the house.

There he met Rush Powell and Sam Startle, both mounted on the same horse and riding slowly toward the Tremper residence.

The sight of his discovered rival and his obnoxious young relative was just then almost enough to paralyze him; but he was hard to paralyze, and nothing but the deepening frown on his face betrayed his feelings.

He did not stop to discharge Rush Powell from his service, or even to speak to him, but rode by with still lips and a scowling face.

Sam Startle knew at once the man who had called himself Mr. Morley, and gave him a glance of recognition; but he was merely included in the general scowl.

"That is the man who hired dad to wreck the the brig," said Sam, as soon as they were out of hearing of the discourteous passer-by.

"I suppose so," answered Powell. "I have had no doubt of that since you described him to me. He seemed to want to have nothing to do with either of us. I wonder what he has been up to at Colonel Tremper's place, and that is what I want to find out."

The young engineer hastened the pace of the sluggish horse, and rode into the grounds of the Tremper mansion, coming in sight of the house before Eva had retired from the piazza.

She saw him, and there came into her face such a look of joy as drove away all traces of her recent gloom and pain.

Rush Powell, with August Engel and Boney Priddle had before that time been guests, and welcome guests at the Tremper mansion, and since their first visit Powell had taken occasion to call there frequently, with the result which Morley Plympton had guessed at.

Colonel Tremper, quite broken down by the sad information he had received from his daughter, had retired to his own apartment to solace himself with his bottle—if it had been good news he would have celebrated it in the same way, and Eva was quite at liberty to receive and welcome her friends.

"Ritta!" she called loudly, and an old negro woman came forth and instantly recognized the engineer, and gave him quite as cordial a greeting as he received from the young lady.

"Fo' God, Mars'r Rush, I'se ebber so glad to see you. Dar ain't none o' de boys about, an' I'll take car' o' dis yer' boss ef you'll let me. Hurry up now, honey. Miss Eva is waitin' fur you."

Rush Powell needed no hurrying up for that part of the business.

He saw that Eva was waiting for him, and hastened to be welcomed by her and to make her acquainted with Sam Startle.

"This is the boy you spoke to me about," said she. "I am glad to see him, and I hope that you are pleased with him."

"More than pleased with him," answered Rush. "He is good stuff, and has been proved. We have had stirring times since I saw you last, Eva dear, and Sam has come out nobly."

"Tell me all about it."

"You shall have the whole story in due time. But I first want to know what has happened here and to you. I met Morley Plympton as I

was coming up the road, and he just scowled and passed me by without a word."

"Indeed! From what he said to me, I supposed that he would have something to say to you as soon as he saw you."

"What did he say to you, Eva? What did he come here for, and what made him carry away such a black look?"

Eva Tremper briefly stated the object and result of Morley Plympton's visit; but that was not enough for Powell, who questioned her until he drew out all the details of that unpleasant interview.

He smiled when he had got hold of the entire account.

"And so Morley Plympton counts me as his servant, and is going to discharge me from his service," said he. "That is a little queer, if not funny. My partner and I were employed by Gideon Scrooby, the agent of the Plympton property. We had nothing to do with Morley Plympton, and it is nothing to us whether he now owns the lands or does not. He can't discharge any of us, Eva, as we have already discharged ourselves."

"How is that?"

"We were to run a line between the Plympton land and the Tremper property, and he wanted us, or Scrooby did, to run it unfairly, so as to cut off a big slice of your land. We refused to take part in any such game as that, and when old Scrooby insisted on it, we threw up our hands and told him that he would have to find other surveyors. As for us, we can easily find other work when we want it."

The day was near its close when Rush Powell and Sam Startle reached the Tremper mansion, and when this point in the mutual communications was reached, supper was ready, and they were invited in.

Colonel Tremper had solaced himself under his afflictions to such an extent that he was not disposed to come to the table, and the young people had it to themselves.

After supper, they returned to the veranda, where the young engineer enjoyed his usual smoke and related to Eva Tremper the recent adventure of the surveying party with the Hyleys, touching as lightly as he could the bloody details of the close of that drama, and praising the pluck and devotion of Sam Startle.

"It was a terrible experience," said Eva, "and it seems to me that no money should tempt you to risk your lives in that region. I think, too, that you have done well to refuse to have anything more to do with Morley Plympton, and I wish that none of us might have anything more to do with him."

Powell blew a vigorous cloud of smoke, and proceeded to express himself freely concerning Morley Plympton as being a rascal with whom nobody but the sheriff ought to have anything to do.

"But I suppose there is no doubt," continued the young man, "that he has a strong hold upon your property here, and that's where the trouble comes in. Without intending any disrespect to Colonel Tremper, I must say that he has needlessly involved the property here, and therefore he, if anybody, ought to be the sufferer. I must say, too, that if you could consent to make a complete sacrifice of yourself for his sake, he would not be a bit better off than he is now."

"He would get a master," said Eva, "and one who would encourage him to drink himself to death, unless I am greatly mistaken, and believe him to be capable of any meanness. Nothing could happen that would be so bad, both for your father and yourself, as a surrender to that rascal. But it would not surprise me a bit, Eva dear, if a way should be found to head him off."

"Indeed! Why, Rush, what can you be thinking of?"

"Look at that boy, Eva. Not much style about him just now, I admit; but he's a diamond in the rough, Sam is, and he may be worth a great deal to us, before we are through with him."

"I hope you are not joking with me, Rush; but I cannot begin to guess what you mean."

"Through that boy I have something of a hold on Morley Plympton, through an unlawful transaction of his with Sam's father. It is true that there is no legal proof of the crime, as Sam's father is now dead; but the publication of the story as it stands would be likely to worry the rascal considerably."

"I doubt it," was Eva's opinion. "An appeal to his conscience or his sense of shame would be like pouring water on a duck's back."

"Well, I suppose it may be doubted if anything short of the sight of the State Prison would scare him; but we may get a stronger and better hold on him. Sam, do you remember that when I met you on Danger Point I said that I thought I had heard your name somewhere?"

"Somethin' that way, I b'lieve, sir."

"I was sure that I had heard the name, and in connection with the Plympton family, too; but I had only a vague idea of the matter at the time. Since then I have thought it over, and have written some letters for the purpose of finding out whether my guess was correct. The result is that I am almost sure that Sam Startle

here is a nearer relative of the late Benjamin Plympton's than Morley Plympton is."

"That would be very good news," declared Eva, "if it should prove to be true."

"Of course the trouble is with the proof. My father was a lawyer in North Carolina, and I was brought up to believe that evidence is every thing. Benjamin Plympton's only daughter married against her father's will a man named Absalom Startle, and that was the name of Sam's father. Wasn't it, Sam?"

That was the name, and the lad was sure of it.

"What was your mother's name, Sam?"

"Same as dad's, I reckon."

"Her first name, I mean."

"Well, I can't be so sure o' that. Dad used to call her Old Fool and lots of other names; but sometimes, when he felt kinder good-natured, I think he called her Emma Dear."

"I think we've got it about right," observed Powell. "Emma was the name of Benjamin Plympton's only child, and I have no longer any doubt that Sam Startle is her son. As I understand the matter, though I have not yet looked into it at all carefully, Morley Plympton takes his uncle's property not under a will, but as next of kin in the absence of a will. But he is only a nephew, while Sam Startle is a grandson, and Sam comes first in the law."

"That is plain enough, I am sure," said Eva.

"Plain enough, if we can prove it; but there may be a great deal of difficulty in proving the marriage and that Sam is the son of Absalom and Emma Startle. I will tell you what we will do, Sam."

"What is that, Mr. Powell?"

"We will go to Danger Point and look through the old shanty there. I doubt if anybody has meddled with it."

"Don't see why anybody should want it."

"Unless it should be Morley Plympton. Anyhow, we will go there and rummage about. Perhaps your father left some papers or letters or pictures that may throw light on the matter. Of course no papers were ever known to prove a person's identity, except in plays. Did you ever hear of anything of the kind outside of plays?"

"Well, I dunno," answered Sam, supposing that the question was addressed to him. "When I was a little feller I went to school for a while, and we used to play tag and marbles and hide-and-seek; but—"

"Oh, I was speaking of plays that are acted on the stage, and of course you don't know anything about them. But papers and such things are sometimes good circumstantial evidence, and they may at least tell us where the real proofs can be found. So we will go to Danger Point to-morrow, Sam, and will rummage the old shanty."

Before Powell started the next morning he was seen by Colonel Tremper, who was just then in a very sour and gloomy mood.

He had suspected the young engineer's intentions toward his daughter, and, as inquiry confirmed his suspicions, he wanted to say that he strongly objected to those intentions, and therefore desired Mr. Powell to discontinue his visits.

"Very well, sir," answered Rush. "When I do come here again, I believe that you will be glad to see me."

CHAPTER XII.

SAM STARTLE'S PRIZE.

RUSH POWELL and Sam made their way to Danger Point, both mounted on the horse that had brought them to Colonel Tremper's.

Necessarily their progress was slow, and it was night when they reached their destination—so late, indeed, that they thought it would be better to rest and postpone the rummaging until morning.

The place looked as natural as ever, with no change about it that they could perceive, but it was terribly lonesome to Sam in the absence of his father.

There was the grave of Absalom Startle, which those two had made, with the little mound of stones which they had placed to mark it, and it did not seem to have been disturbed, and probably had not been.

Sam shed no tears at the grave—not that he had got too old for such weakness, but because he was willing to admit that he did not mourn the fate of his father, who had never been a joy or comfort to his young life.

Indeed, he was quite sure that he was in every way better off since his father's death than he had been during his life.

It was not until they began their search in the hut that they discovered evidences of recent outside interference.

Sam went at once to the lockers which his father had used, and in which he expected to find some old letters and other papers, but nothing of the kind was to be seen there.

The lad was quite certain that there had been papers in at least one of the lockers, and the conclusion was that somebody had been there before them and had taken them away.

To make sure of this point, he went to a battered seaman's chest which had been his father's special treasure-box, and which he had always kept locked.

Sam had made no attempt to open this chest before he left Danger Point, respecting his

father's wishes even after his death; but he was not deterred by any such scruples now.

He speedily perceived that somebody had been less scrupulous than himself, as the lock had been forced, and the chest opened easily.

Even then, as far as the lad was able to judge, there was no inside evidence of disturbance or interference, except that there was not a scrap of paper left in the chest.

Sam Startle was sure that his father had kept a bundle of letters in there, as he had seen him occasionally take them out and read them, and he had always supposed them to be his mother's letters.

Above all things he was positive that a photograph of his mother had been in the chest, as it had sometimes been shown to him when he had begged to be allowed to see it, and had then been carefully returned to its place.

But there was no photograph there then, nor any bundle of letters, nor any papers of any kind from which the slightest information could be gleaned.

"That settles it," said Powell. "Somebody has been here since we went away, and has gone through the establishment from end to end. He was no ordinary thief, either, and did not come here for plunder, but for just what he got, and that was the very papers that we have been looking for."

"I reckon you're right about that," assented the lad.

"I have no doubt of it, and I have no doubt that the person who did that job of rummaging was Morley Plympton. Perhaps he came to look for you, Sam, and it may have been a lucky thing for you that he did not find you here. Anyhow, he has gone through the chest and the lockers thoroughly, and has found and carried away everything he wanted. That proves that he is your mother's cousin, as no other person could have any interest in getting hold of papers that might help you to prove who you are."

"I e'en a'most wish I'd shot him when I had a good chance," said Sam.

"It is a wonder that he did not shoot you or make way with you somehow. Well, Sam, I am now fully convinced that you are Benjamin Plympton's grandson and his heir, and that Morley Plympton knows it; but the chance of proving the fact seems to be further off than ever, and I am afraid that we will have a great deal of difficulty in getting at the truth."

"Will we have to give it up, then?"

"We will have to take hold of the hard end. I will go to Coahoula and see Judge Wilshire, who is a good friend of mine, and will get his advice. But there is nothing more for us to do here, and we had better be getting back to the shore."

They had stepped out of the hut for this purpose, and Powell had begun to get the horse ready, when Sam was seized by an idea.

Though it struck him suddenly, it did not take hold upon him immediately. Indeed, he debated it mentally a few moments before he was willing to give it utterance.

Of course it had nothing to do with the business that had brought them to Danger Point, and it was a secret of his own; but Rush Powell had proved himself a good friend, true in action and intention, and why should not that friend share all his secrets?

Doubtless it was such a train of reasoning that caused him to speak as he did speak.

"Say, Mr. Powell, thar's somethin' else here." "Something of your father's?" inquired the engineer.

"Well, no. I reckon it's as much mine as anybody's. Dad, saw it, though, and he was fetchin' it ashore when he got his knock-down blow from the spar I told you about. He didn't see nothin' more of it, though, and I hived it, and it's here yet."

"What is it, Sam?"

"Some so t of a box."

"Perhaps we may as well take a look at it, though we have really no time to spare if we mean to get anywhere near our friends before sundown."

Sam led his friend near to the pile of rock, and speedily unearthed the box which his father had rescued from the waves and he had buried in the sand.

Powell examined it with interest.

"It looks," said he, as if it might be a valuable box, or one that might hold valuables. I think, Sam, that we would be justified in trying to get inside of it and see what it contains."

"That's why I spoke to you about it."

The box was locked, and with a style of lock that could not be easily picked; but this did not bother the investigators when they had decided upon opening it.

Sam brought out from the hut some of his father's tools, and his friend set at work to pry off the lid of the box.

He succeeded in getting it open without doing any particular damage to the article, and it proved to be a writing desk, one of the old-fashioned kind, with a green cover on the writing-slope.

The inside arrangements were also locked, but these locks were easily and quickly forced.

In the main apartment, besides some letter

paper with envelopes and other writing utensils, was found a small bundle of letters.

Attached to the bundle was a document composed of heavy paper, folded, legal fashion, and indorsed in the hand of a law copyist.

This document at once attracted the attention of Rush Powell, who fairly grabbed it, his eyes almost starting from his head with eagerness and amazement.

"Heavens and earth, Sam!" he exclaimed.

"Here's a find! Why, this is just wonderful!"

"What's the paper?" inquired Sam.

"Your grandfather's will. Here it is as plain as the eyes in your head—'The Will of Benjamin Plympton.' Hold your horses, now, till I take a squint at it. I only hope that he hasn't left his property to that sneaking scoundrel."

Sam almost held his breath as the engineer hurriedly unfolded the paper and glanced over its contents.

As he read, he could hardly contain himself, and at last his astonishment and delight burst forth.

"Why, Sam, this is great! It is glorious! It is immense! That property is all yours, and you are as rich as swamp mud. You are not only the heir at law, but the heir by the will. Your grandfather has given you everything he had."

Sam Startle thrust his hands into his pockets, spread out his legs, and opened his eyes to their fullest extent; but he could not do justice to the subject.

"Jewhillekens!" he exclaimed. "Why that's jest old pie! I don't take it in yet; but I reckon it's a big thing."

"It's the biggest kind of a thing, my boy, and one of the prettiest points about it is the fact that it knocks Morley Plympton higher than a kite."

"I hope thar ain't no mistake about that."

"I don't see how there can be any mistake about it, Sam. The whole business is plain to me now. That rascal must have known that this will was aboard the vessel that was wrecked off here, and he laid his plans to make an end of the craft and all on board just for the sake of destroying that paper. It is strange that the brig, or whatever it was, should have been off the coast here just when that storm came along; but it seems that the devil helps his own."

"Sometimes the Lord takes a hand in the game, though," suggested Sam.

"That is what happened in this case. Morley Plympton supposed that the will had been destroyed, that you would never get any knowledge of your rights, and that he would have a sure thing on coming in for the property as the next of kin. But that box came ashore, though your father lost his life in trying to save it, and now we've got it and the box."

"What'll we do with 'em?" inquired Sam.

"We will mount this horse and ride to where we can get a team, and then we will go to Coahoula and put the will in charge of Judge Wilshire and tell him the whole story."

CHAPTER XIII.

SPOILING A SCHEMER.

RUSH POWELL replaced the will where he had found it, secured the precious box with cords, and mounted the horse with Sam Startle behind him.

Of course their progress was slow when they were riding double with the added weight of the box, and they could not hope to reach before night any place where they could get a team, unless they should possibly find one at Cator's tavern, a rude hostelry in the woods which drew a scanty custom from hunters and 'gator men and rough characters generally.

As it was dark when they reached Cator's, they decided that they had better stop there and get some supper and pass the night.

The place had a bad enough reputation; but there was nothing in their appearance to invite robbery, unless the box should prove an attraction to predatory characters, and they believed, as they were both armed, that they were pretty well able to take care of themselves.

Fortunately they found nobody at the house but Andy Cator and his wife—the former a rough customer, who was always soaked with his own whisky, and the latter a frowsy, wild-eyed woman who looked as if she had a hard time in the world and never expected anything else.

The absence of other guests was pleasing to Rush Powell and his young companion, as it was likely that they would have a safe and quiet night of it.

After attending to their horse they were provided with such a supper as the place could furnish, and they made a hearty meal, though the venison was fried and the corn-dodgers were nearly as hard as brickbats.

Powell kept the mahogany box near him, never getting out of sight of it, and Sam Startle also watched it closely.

Though they tried to make their carefulness in this matter as unobtrusive as possible, the box naturally attracted the attention of Cator and his wife, both of whom eyed it curiously.

"W'ot you got in that box?" demanded Cator

when he was no longer able to restrain his curiosity.

"An electric battery," answered Powell.

"Lectric batt'ry? W'ot's that?"

Powell explained as simply as he could the nature of electricity, and described an electric shock by comparing it with a stroke of lightning.

"Suthin' like bottled lightnin' you've got shut up in thar, then?"

"That is it exactly."

"Costly sort o' stuff, hey?"

"Oh, no, not what you might call costly; but I have to be very careful of it, because it is dangerous."

"Hope the durned stuff won't go fur to blow us all up to-night."

"No danger of that, while I watch it, and nobody but me touches it."

"And how is Sammy gittin' on these days?" inquired the landlord, who was well acquainted with Absalom Startle's boy, having seen him at Danger Point and when he was sent to the tavern by his father for whisky.

"He is in the surveying business with me," answered Powell, "and is getting on nicely."

"Sh'd say that you don't starve him, jedgin' by his looks. Well, I reckon he's better off sence his daddy shipped his moorin's, though I must say that they's wuss folks in this world than Ab. Startle was."

When the guests were ready to retire, and they were ready soon after supper, they were not ushered by an officious waiter and by way of an elevator to number 999 on the tenth floor of the hotel, but were pointed to their dormitory on the second floor, which was reached by a crazy and creaking flight of steps.

The Hotel Cator, in fact, was composed of one story and an attic, the two guest chambers being in the attic, and the lower floor was occupied by the bar-room, the kitchen, and the sleeping apartment of the proprietor, and his wife.

Rush Powell and Sam Startle had no lamp or candle to go to bed by, such a luxury being quite beyond the comprehension of Andy Cator.

"Any durned fool," he was wont to say, "w'ot hain't got sense enough to git into bed without a light, hain't got no call to go to sleep, nohow."

As the bed did not need much getting into, being of a very primitive construction, and requiring no sort of skill to make it up, the landlord was more than half right in his opinion.

The two travelers did not care for a light, as they only wanted to get out of sight with their treasure and keep quiet until morning.

There was a moon, that luminary being then in its second quarter; but the moonlight was fitful and uncertain, breaking infrequently and for brief intervals through heavy masses of clouds.

Sam Startle squatted at the little window of the garret-like apartment, which was in the gable end of the building, not far from the front door.

He had been there but a little while when his quick ears caught the sound of a low whistle near by, and shortly afterward he uttered a suppressed exclamation that attracted the attention of his companion.

Powell was about to leave the box and go to see what was the matter; but a warning gesture from Sam admonished him to remain where he was and keep quiet.

Directly the lad stole silently back to where his friend was seated, and whispered to him.

"I saw out, thar the man who paid dad for wreckin' the brig."

"Morley Plympton?"

"Just that same sneakin' cuss."

"Are you sure it was he?"

"As sart'in as I am that you're you. Andy Cator gave a whistle, and that man came out of the timber; and I saw him plain enough in the moonlight. After a bit he crossed the road and came into the house here."

"What does that mean, do you suppose?"

"Some devilment, it's safe to bet. I'm goin' to find out."

"How will you do it?"

"Sneak down below and listen to what they're sayin'."

The lad slipped off his shoes, left the room and disappeared in the darkness.

Rush Powell took off his boots and imitated Sam's example, but followed him no further than the head of the stairs, where he stood with a cocked revolver, ready to go to the boy's rescue in case he should be discovered.

But Sam was too sharp to be caught at his spying.

He stole down the creaking stairway as silently as a cat might have done, and stationed himself in the passage down there at the bar-room door, where a light from within shone out through a crack.

Sounds came out to him also, and this is what he heard as he listened:

"They are both here, then?" was said by the voice which he remembered so well as that of "Mr. Morley."

"They's here all right," answered Cator. "Ab. Startle's boy and the ingineer. They's gone up-stairs to bed."

"Have they gone to sleep yet?"

"Speet they hain't. Leastways, I heer'd 'em stirrin' around up thar a bit ago. But they eat so much supper, durn 'em! that I reckon they'll be sleepin' to'able sudden and mighty sound."

"That will suit me, if I can be sure that they are asleep. You know what I mean, Andy Cator. I want to wipe out that Startle boy."

"H-m-m, yaas; I reckon I understand that. Whar do I come in?"

"You shall have five hundred dollars in cash as soon as the job is done."

"That's a sight of money. Hope you don't want me to settle the kid, though."

"No, I will do the rough work. What I pay you for is giving me the chance I want and keeping quiet about it afterward."

"How about the engineer?"

"Confound him! I wish he was in Tophet. He is in my way at every step I take, and I hate him."

"Ef he cuts up rusty," suggested Cator, "he'll hev to be bornswoggled."

"That's so, and I think I can get away with both of them if I must; but perhaps I had better have your help."

"That'll come higher. More work, more pay."

"I will pay you well, Andy Cator. I will double the sum I offered you, if the job is thoroughly done."

"I've heern tell that you're a rich man now, Mr. Plympton, and you orter be good fur w'ot you promise. I reckon you'll keep your word, too."

"Of course I will keep my word."

"Ef you didn't, I'd know how to make you suffer. It's settled, then. W'ot do you want me to do fu'st?"

"I want you to be sure that they are asleep up-stairs, and that everything is right for us to make the break. I suppose you will have to go up there and listen."

"I know a better trick than that. Wait a bit, and arter a while I'll send up the old woman. She's as quiet as a cat."

Sam Startle had heard enough to satisfy him for one night.

He crept up the creaky stairs, slipped into the sleeping-room, and told Rush Powell in a few words of the plot to murder one or both of them.

The engineer was not at all excited by this intelligence; in fact, he had been expecting something of the kind, and he had already considered the situation and decided what should be done.

"We might fight them off," said he. "Since we know their plans, we would have a big advantage over them, and it is likely that we could get the best of them. But there is more or less risk in that, and the easiest way is the best."

"What is the easiest way?" inquired Sam.

"Just to slide out and disappoint them. Pick up your shoes and my boots, and follow me. I will carry the box."

The engineer led the way into the narrow passage at the head of the stairs.

Though the passage was quite dark, there was an open window at the rear end, closed by a shutter in bad weather, and under the window was the shed that served as a kitchen.

Powell let Sam down by the arms upon the roof of the shed, handing him the foot-gear and the box, and then let himself down.

In the same way he lowered the boy to the ground and followed him, the entire proceeding being conducted so quietly that one would not even have fancied a cat upon the roof.

When they were safe on the ground they put on their shoes and boots and hastened to the shed where their horse was tethered.

In a few minutes the horse was bridled and saddled, and Powell led him carefully until they were well out of sight and hearing of the house.

Then they mounted and rode away as rapidly as they could urge the animal to carry them.

It was only for a little while that they kept to the road, turning off into the woods, where they found a dry spot and lay down to sleep in the open air.

"This is a durned sight better than any bed that Andy Cator's got, anyhow," cheerfully remarked Sam, and his comrade was of the opinion that it was also much safer.

In the morning they struck into the road and kept on until they reached a plantation where they got their breakfast.

They also secured a wagon and driver to take them to Coahoula, and in due course of time reached that little town, where they lost no time in waiting on Judge Wilshire and engaging his services.

Rush Powell told the story of Sam Startle as far as he knew it, and that was sufficient for the present inquiry, bringing the narrative down to the murderous plot from which they had so narrowly escaped at Cator's tavern.

He then opened the box and produced the will, which Judge Wilshire read through carefully.

"You could not ask for anything better than this," said the lawyer. "It settles the question

of identity without putting us to any trouble to prove that your young friend is the heir. The property is left descriptively to 'Samuel Startle, my grandchild, son of Absalom and Emma Startle, who is now, or was lately, living at Danger Point on the coast of Florida.' That is plain enough, and it proves that the old man must have kept the run of the youngster. Now let us see what else there is in this box which has so fortunately come into your possession."

The bundle of letters that has been spoken of proved on examination to have been written at various intervals of time by Benjamin Plympton to Thomas Cresswell.

"That is the man," observed the lawyer, "who was one of the witnesses of the will and is named as executor. I will read the letters when I have time, and they will doubtless throw more light on the business. I presume that the will was in the care of Mr. Cresswell, and that he was lost on the wrecked brig. Now we will see what else there is in the box."

There were four compartments or drawers that were opened, and three of them were found to be stuffed full of valuable jewels wrapped in cotton, whose beauty and brilliance made the beholders stare when they were displayed.

"I don't pretend to know much about the worth of these articles," said the lawyer; "but Mr. Plympton must have been a very wealthy man if he could afford to wear such sparklers. The case is as clear as daylight, Mr. Powell. One of the witnesses of the will must be dead, and the other is probably in Cuba and will have to be got hold of. That will cost something."

"There is the jewelry to go on for expenses," suggested the engineer.

"We cannot touch that until the question of ownership is settled. We must make a list of them, seal them up, and put them in safe keeping."

"I've got five hundred dollars," observed Sam. "It's the money that Mr. Morley gave dad for wreckin' the brig, and I reckon thar ain't nothin' to hinder me from chippin' that in."

"Of course that is yours, and you can do as you please with it," assented Powell. "Wouldn't Morley Plympton be tearing mad, though, if he could know that he had furnished you with funds to fight him and upset him?"

CHAPTER XIV.

PLOTTING AGAINST A LIFE.

AGAIN Gideon Scrooby was seated in his broad, hide-bottomed arm-chair on the veranda of his old but well-kept house, placidly smoking his inevitable pipe, and again Morley Plympton rode up, hitched his horse, and approached his agent and adviser.

His face, never pleasant to look upon, was darker and sourer than ever, and his air and manner were unusually morose and surly.

"Where have you come from this cool day, and what's been stirring up the bile in you now, Mr. Plympton?" calmly inquired the Scotchman, but with the suspicion of a sneer on his sardonic features.

"Give me something to drink, Gid. I'm too dry to talk."

Liquid refreshments were quickly brought out, and Plympton "wet his whistle" pretty thoroughly before he lighted a cigar and settled himself.

"I am tired out," he said, "and just now I feel mean enough to cut my throat, or some other man's throat."

"Don't begin with mine, please. I doubt if I could enjoy my smoke with my throat slit. If you think that you can afford to cut your throat, or that there is no better use to which you can put yourself, please step off on the grass to do the bloody work. What is the matter with you, anyhow? Where have you come from?"

"From Colonel Tremper's, last. I went there to give the old seed a fair and square notice that unless his daughter becomes my wife pretty soon, I will foreclose that mortgage and turn him adrift in the swamps."

"I suppose you nearly scared the life out of the old warrior, too. It will be a wonder if you don't drive him to drink before long."

"Drive him to drink," muttered the obtuse Morley Plympton. "Don't he drink enough now?"

"Not enough to suit him, I am afraid. Perhaps he could hold a little more if he should try, and if he was always sure of having it handy. Well, Morley, you have a right to foreclose the mortgage if you want to. It is not due yet, but there is a pile of unpaid interest. How did the old warrior take your talk this time?"

"He told me what I already knew, that he had tried to persuade the girl into it, but she was obstinate, and didn't seem to care what became of the plantation or any of them. I told him that he would have to do a good deal stronger persuading if he wanted to keep a roof over his head; but it seemed to me, Gid, that he took on a more independent tone than I ever before knew him to use."

The Scotchman took his pipe from his mouth, and leaned forward; his coarse features suddenly lighted up by an expression of intense interest.

"How was that?" he demanded. "What was the style of his independence?"

"Well, he talked about being unwilling to force the inclinations of his only child, and said that he should never forgive himself if he should make her unhappy."

"That was cool, considering."

"I told him that it was rather frosty, under the circumstances, and that it wasn't a question of inclination, but a question of cash. 'Do you owe me that money,' said I, 'or don't you?'"

"I suppose I owe it to you," said he, "or to somebody else."

"He said that, did he? He must have heard the news then, and that accounts for his independence."

"What news, what are you talking about?" angrily demanded Plympton.

"Well, Morley, I think you must have heard it; but perhaps you don't take notice of trifles like that? It can't be called news, either, as it is only a rumor."

"What sort of a rumor? Do you want to worry the life out of me?"

"Only a rumor that Absalom Startle's son, the boy whose life you spared, has been taken up by Judge Wilshire, of Coahoula, who is going to bring suit to put him in possession of the Plympton property as the heir."

"I had not heard it, but had expected to hear something of the kind before long. It is all the doing of that cursed surveyor, young Powell. He is in my way at every step I take. But I am not a bit afraid of that thing, Gid, whether it is mere rumor or a solid fact. They can never prove that the boy is Benjamin Plympton's grandson, or has any rights in the property."

"I hope they can't; but it would be much better for you if they had never got a chance to try. What an opening you missed, Morley Plympton! How you threw away your opportunity!"

"I don't want you to preach to me."

"Queer preaching, this is. I am only giving you facts. You thought it was a fine scheme when you hired Absalom Startle to work out his own destruction and his son's, and it did work finely, especially when Satan came to your help, and the man was killed by the very wreck he had helped to cause. You thought your way was clear then, and that there would be nobody to bother you; but you failed to take care of the most important point of all. You let the boy live."

"This not the first time you have thrown that up to me, Scrooby. I know that I made a mistake then."

"When a man commits an error, he should try to repair it before it is too late."

"I have been trying, but fate seems to have been against me so far. Directly after you first mentioned that matter to me I went to Danger Point to look for the young snake; but he had slid away."

"Gone to join your surveyors."

"I learned that afterward. As I failed to find the boy, I went through his father's shanty and hunted up and brought away every scrap of paper that had anything to do with him or his people, including a photograph of his mother. I made a clean sweep of that part of the business, anyhow."

"You did well, Morley. The next best thing, in law, to getting rid of the plaintiff is the destruction of his evidence. But the plaintiff still lives."

"When I learned that he was with these surveyors, I took measures to have him wiped out, and employed Abe Hyley and his crew to do the job."

"How did you happen to come across them?" inquired the Scotchman as a queer look came into his face.

"There was no happen about it. I hunted them up. I had know them before."

"Seems to me that I heard something of your being mixed up with those creatures in the days when you were gypsying about. But it was a risky scheme, and it don't seem to have worked. How was that?"

"That is what beats me and breaks me all up. The Hyley gang came to the strangest end, and I can't account for it or begin to understand it, unless they all got drunk together and set fire to themselves."

"Do you mean to say that they were burned up?"

"All cremated. As I saw that the surveyors were alive and kicking, and as I heard nothing from the Hyleys, I went out there to hunt them again. I found their ark, or the remains of it, the shanty burned off, and the logs stranded near the water's edge. I went aboard of the wreck and discovered some charred bones and a mess of nasty stuff that I supposed to be what was left of their bodies. But there were no more Hyleys."

"I wish they had struck that surveying party before they started the conflagration. The boy still lives."

Morley Plympton sighed deeply and helped himself liberally to the liquor.

"Not long ago, Gid," said he, "I had another chance at the nuisance—at him and the young surveyor; but it missed. I knew that they had gone to Danger Point, and I was watching for them on their return."

"Like an angel," suggested the Scotchman.

"None of your sneers, Scrooby, I was doing the best I could, for you as well as for myself. I saw them go in o Andy Cator's place, and I had already struck a deal with him for settling their cases if they should put up there. So he let me know when they were out of the way, and I went over and fixed the matter up with him quietly."

"There does seem to be some advantage in mixing with that sort of people; but it is risky."

"It has to be done in such a case as this. They had gone up-stairs to bed, and we waited until we supposed that they were asleep, and then Andy sent his wife up to make sure. She came back with the news that there was nobody there—that they had skipped."

"Without taking the trouble to call on the landlord and pay their bill—the rascals!"

"They had slipped out silently and secretly, and their horse was gone, and of course they had decamped, and there was no use in trying to hunt them at night. I suppose they must have got wind of the scheme somehow, though I can't imagine how that can have happened."

"That makes the matter worse, Morley. It is bad enough that the scheme failed; but if the enemy discovered it, that is very bad indeed. And the boy still lives."

The repetition of this saddening statement sent Morley Plympton again to the bottle for consolation.

"Fate has been against me so far," said he; "but my luck will take a turn. It usually runs in streaks, and there are plenty of schemes and chances left. In the mean time I will defy Judge Wilshire or anybody else to prove that the young snake is what they claim him to be."

The Scotchman screwed up his face until it was hard and pinched look suddenly added ten years to his apparent age, and he again leaned forward and spoke impressively.

"Don't you be too cock-sure of that, Morley Plympton. There may be more in this business than you would ever guess at."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I have not been idle, my friend and partner. I have been looking sharply after your interests, which of course include my own at present. As soon as I heard of those rumors I set at work to learn something definite, and have been spying myself as well as using a spy."

"What have you learned?"

"I have penetrated into the enemy's camp and got hold of the heart of the secret. It is something surprising—in fact, it is astounding."

"Tell it, then, and don't make so much talk about it."

"Judge Wilshire claims that he will have no difficulty in proving his case, because he has in his possession Benjamin Plympton's will, which describes and identifies Absalom Startle's son as the heir."

Morley Plympton jumped up as if he had been shot, and for a few minutes he shook as if with an ague chill.

"The will?" he exclaimed when the spasm had subsided. "That is impossible. I am sure that the will was on the Jeannette in charge of Captain Tom Cresswell."

"There is no doubt of that, I presume."

"And the brig was lost, and he and everything on board of her went to the bottom with the wreck."

"Not quite everything, my friend and partner. That is where the astonisher comes in. A box came ashore at Danger Point, and that box was saved by Sam Startle, after his father had lost his life in trying to rescue it from the waves."

"The eternal tornadoes!"

"Try again. I don't think you can invent any language strong enough to fit the case. In that box was Benjamin Plympton's will, which is now secure in the possession of Judge Wilshire."

Morley Plympton was again obliged to resort to the bottle to steady his nerves.

"That sort of thing is beyond all calculation," he murmured feebly.

"Yes, it is astonishing how Satan sometimes goes back on his best friends."

"When the engineer and the boy rode up to Cator's I noticed that they had a box on the horse, and Andy said that he asked about the box, and Powell told him that it was an electric battery."

"One that is calculated to give you a very heavy shock, I should say."

"If I had known what it was, I would have hesitated at nothing. If I could have got them then and there, the whole business would have been settled forever."

"But it was not settled, and the boy still lives."

"Do you believe, Scrooby, that they will be able to put him in possession of the property under that will?"

"If he lives, yes, and there is only one thing in the world left for you to do."

"What is that?"

"You know what it is. The very thing you ought to have done when you were alone with him on the sand at Danger Point. Even if he should be put in possession of the property, and you should be turned adrift in the swamps as you threatened to turn Colonel Tremper adrift, you would be his heir in case of his death. If his father had lived, Absalom Startle would be the heir; now it would be Morley Plympton."

"Then there is nothing but his death that I have to depend on."

"Positively nothing."

"That business must be attended to, then, and there is no time to be lost about it, and I must manage it so as to make it a sure and safe thing. I am fully waked up to the importance of the matter now, and there shall be no half-way measures."

"What do you propose to do?" inquired the Scotchman.

"I mean to see some of the swamper and put them on the trail of the young snake. There are others besides the Hyleys, and I know some who can be depended on."

"You had better be careful, Morley, how you venture among those untamed creatures. It is dangerous, I tell you."

"Not to me. I know them and their ways, and they know me well. I have been with them a good deal, off and on."

"When there was nothing for them to gain by hornswoggling you, as they call it. They may have since learned that you are a rich man, and their lawful game. That was all very well while you hadn't a dollar; but it is too risky now that you are a man of money."

"If I don't run some such risks, Gid, I may soon find myself without a dollar again."

"The pitcher that goes often to the well is broken at last. You had better let me take a hand in the game, and try a little plan of my own."

"What sort of a plan?"

"Judge Wilshire, who is the agent for some Northern men who have bought an extensive tract of swamp and other land, has given that surveying party a job to go over the tract and report upon it, and of course young Startle will go with them. I shall learn when they are to start and the route they are to take, and will then know where and how to strike them."

"Go ahead, Gid. I only hope that your luck will be better than mine has been."

"Your luck has been wonderfully good; but you let your best chance slip."

"Don't give me any more of that, please."

CHAPTER XV.

INTO THE WILDERNESS.

THE statements made by Gideon Scrooby to Morley Plympton were quite accurate.

The crafty Scotchman, always wide awake to his own interests, had been spying and employing a spy, and had picked up various important points, the knowledge of which would be useful to himself and to the employer, whom he considered as a partner.

Judge Wilshire, as Scrooby said, had arranged for Rush Powell and his party an expedition which promised to be both extensive and interesting.

It was not so much for the purpose of surveying—though the work could be done properly only by experienced surveyors—as for the purpose of inspection and examination of the large tract in question, so that the purchaser might know exactly where and how it lay, might understand its capacities and needs, and so might judge what they had better do with it.

The agent, who was well acquainted with the skill and thoroughness of Rush Powell and his partner, was glad to get hold of them when they had severed their connection with Gideon Scrooby and his employer, and had at once pounced upon them and engaged them for this service.

There was a great attraction in this expedition to the entire party, not only because they were to explore a wild and unknown region, but because they were to enjoy the novelty and comparative luxury of steam transportation.

It was true that their steamer was to be neither a large nor pretentious affair, being merely a small steam launch that had been fitted up for them; but they were to manage and control it, and would be quite free and independent.

No more toilsome and tedious tramps through forests and swamps, with one horse to carry their provisions and instruments, but a boat with a teakettle boiler, a baby engine and a saucy little screw, which would convey them and their belongings up the little rivers and over the quiet lagoons with but little expenditure of muscle beyond that required for cutting the wood for the fires.

Naturally Sam Startle fell deeply in love with this style of an expedition, and was crazy to accompany his friends.

Rush Powell had some misgivings about allowing him to do so, feeling that his existence was so important in his present position that he ought to run no risks, but had better stay where he was safe at least until his affairs were settled.

Sam treated all such arguments and obligations with utter disdain.

He was not yet a wealthy proprietor, and some time must elapse before his rights could be legally secured.

In the mean while he must do something to employ his time and earn a living, and he could not bear to be separated from the surveyors, and one place was as safe as another, and he was sure that he could nowhere be safer than with the friends whom he had tried and proved.

The upshot of the business was, as nothing else would satisfy the lad, that he was allowed to make one of the party, and nobody doubted that he would be a very useful member.

Rush Powell decided that before the expedition took a final leave of civilized quarters, he and Sam Startle would visit Colonel Tremper's place, as he wanted to say farewell to Eva, and also had a little matter of business to attend to there.

The launch in the mean time to be navigated by August Engel and Boney Priddle, and they would cross the country and meet it at a point agreed upon.

When the engineer and his comrade reached the old Tremper mansion they were joyfully welcomed by Eva, but were more than coldly received by her father.

"I thought I had told you, Mr. Powell," said the old gentleman, "that I did not desire your presence at this house."

"I remember that very well, Colonel Tremper," answered Rush. "I also remember that on the same occasion I told you that when I should come here again you would be glad to see me. I am here now, and you are glad to see me."

"You have no right to make that statement, sir."

"But you will be glad when you know the errand that brought me here. It is purely a business affair, and entirely for your benefit. Please to glance over this paper."

The paper which the young engineer produced was a legal notification to Colonel Tremper, directing him not to pay the principal of a certain mortgage, or any of the interest thereon, to Mr. Morley Plympton, wrongfully claiming to be the owner of the same.

"I can't say that I understand this," said the old gentleman. "I am quite willing to be ordered or compelled not to pay any money to Mr. Morley Plympton, or, for that matter, to any other man; but I would like to know what is at the bottom of this."

"Simply the fact that Morley Plympton has nothing to do with the mortgage mentioned in that paper, as he is not the legal heir of Benjamin Plympton."

"I had heard some hint or rumor to that effect, but did not know how far it was to be relied on. Who, then, is the heir?"

"This young gentleman," answered Rush as he pointed out Sam Startle. "He is the grandson of Benjamin Plympton, who left a will in his favor. His rights are not yet established, but are sure to be, as soon as the formalities of the law will allow."

"I am very glad to hear it—very glad indeed. Yes, Mr. Powell, you are welcome; most heartily welcome. By the way, if I comply with this notification, and I certainly shall do so, will I be sustained in my refusal to pay any money to Morley Plympton?"

"You have Judge Wilshire's word for that, and he will see that you are safe. If anybody should try to make trouble, just send word to him, and he will stand by you."

"Thank you, Mr. Powell. You have lifted a great weight from my mind. You are really quite welcome here to-day."

Though Rush Powell had declared that his visit was purely one of business, his business was thereafter mainly with Eva Tremper.

Her father had shut himself up in his private room to privately celebrate the joyful news he had received, and the lovers had the field to themselves, as Sam Startle had sense enough to know that he ought to "flock by himself" for a while.

They also celebrated the event, but in their own way, which was a much better way than that of Colonel Tremper, as well as more satisfactory themselves, and it is probable that their joy was greater and more solid than his.

Their pleasure, however, was marred by the pain of parting, as Powell was compelled to tear himself away so that he might rejoin his comrades at the time agreed on, and Eva took leave of Sam Startle almost as affectionately as of her lover.

After a rather tiresome journey they reached the little Keewannee River, where they found their steamer waiting for them at the appointed place, and the expedition into the interior was begun under good auspices.

The fact has been noted that the Wave—so the craft was named which had been fitted up for the party—was not much of a steamer.

She was an open boat of light draught, and the only shelter from the weather was an awning which could be put up and removed at pleasure.

As they were going far from any probable human habitation—far, at least, beyond the

bounds of civilization—they were obliged to carry a goodly quantity of provisions, though they expected to subsist largely upon game and fish.

When they were all on board, with their stores and arms and ammunition and clothing and instruments, the launch was brought nearly down to the water's edge, and there was but little room for the men to move about.

They had the satisfaction, however, of knowing that every day would decrease the weight and bulk of the stores, and if Boney Priddle should get no fatter they might be comfortable yet.

In any event it was not their intention to sleep, or as a regular thing to eat, aboard the launch, as the Wave was merely to be used for the purpose of speedy and convenient locomotion, and when they wanted to make a camp they would only need to run to the shore and tie up.

For casual excursions singly the Wave towed a small flat-bottomed dinghy, hardly big enough to hold two men, with a pair of short sculls hung on swivels.

The craft had been loaded and manned and officered quite in shipshape style.

Rush Powell was the captain and steersman, with Sam Startle as his "cub" to be instructed in the latter duty.

August Engel was the engineer, with Boney Priddle as his assistant and fireman, and by the time Powell and Sam joined the Wave, Boney was so well up in his duties that he could be trusted to run the launch alone.

As for roustabouts, all were ready to turn to whenever their services were required in that capacity.

The voyage up the Keewannee was a pleasant one and highly interesting to all the party, as it took them into a region abounding in semi-tropical vegetation, where men had seldom intruded since the departure of the warlike Seminoles, and where new and strange forms of birds and beasts and plants were continually encountered.

Whenever they went ashore to cook and eat, or to make their nightly camp, they cut up a few armfuls of short wood to keep the fire burning under the teakettle of a boiler, as they could only carry a small stock at a time.

The Wave was by no means a fast boat—indeed, she was so slow that they often alluded to her as a tub; but they had the satisfaction of believing that she was as sure as she was slow.

There was no crankiness about her, and the machinery always worked well, and she was dry and in every way safe.

The biggest alligators scurried out of her way as she puffed along slowly but surely, churning the water and sometimes stirring up the mud with her saucy little screw, and creating an unheard of commotion in those solitudes.

As the Wave was so slow, and as hunting was one of the necessities as well as one of the diversions of the party, their progress was not at all rapid, and several days elapsed before they reached their destination—that is to say, the point at which they were to begin their exploration and inspection.

This point was near the head-waters of the Keewannee, and there they left the sluggish little river and entered a series of yet more sluggish lagoons, some larger and some smaller, seeming to form an interminable chain.

Here their explorations began, and they tied up the launch for awhile, two of them usually remaining in charge, while the others made daily excursions in various directions, to note the lay of the land, the quality of the soil and timber, and many other matters of interest on which he had been instructed to report.

Though they were far out of the reach of civilization, and there was no trace of any sort of habitation in that apparently untrodden wilderness, there was something in the air, or somewhere about, which to the practiced eyes and ears of some of the party conveyed an impression of the presence of human beings.

There was nothing definite in this, and they failed to find any sign or trace that could solidly settle the point; but the impression remained.

August Engel and Boney Priddle were "almost sure," as they repeatedly asserted, that there was somebody about, and they were continually looking, as if expecting to stumble upon some person unawares.

This was only curiosity, however, as none of them had the least fear of anybody or anything they might meet in those solitudes.

At the most they could not expect to encounter more than their own number, and their repeating rifles and revolvers would of course give them a great advantage over any foe they would be likely to find in those forests.

"There is one good thing about it, boys," said Rush Powell, who was disposed to make light of what he styled the smelling abilities of his associates.

"There are plenty of good things about it," replied the professor, "and nothing bad as far as we have gone. But what is your good thing, my boy?"

"That we are so far out of the way of Morley Plympton that we may consider ourselves safe

from him. There is nothing I fear but that scoundrel and his schemes."

"Why do you fear him?"

"Because I know that he has made at least one attempt on the life of Sam. When he learns that the lad is likely to upset him with the help of the law, he will do and dare anything to put him out of the way."

"There is something in that, and I hope we are safe from him."

After they had left their first regular camp, and while the Wave was slowly steaming toward the next halting-place, the suspicions concerning the presence of human beings increased, and more than one of the party was ready to affirm that he had caught a glimpse of something in the shape of a man hovering near the course of the launch.

At last August Engel declared that he had surely seen a man who appeared to be watching or following them, and his positive statement of a fact was always accepted by his comrades as the solid truth.

"It is not a matter that need worry us, anyhow," observed Powell. "It is not at all likely that anybody we may meet will be hostile to us, and in any event we are able to take care of ourselves. We proved that on the Hyley gang."

"But we should be more careful than we were when the Hyley gang captured us," suggested the professor.

They saw nothing more to excite their suspicions, and when evening set in they tied up the launch and went ashore to make a camp and prepare their supper.

Hardly had they landed when a man stepped out from the thick foliage of the undergrowth and stood before them.

A more uncivilized and uncouth human being they had never seen, not even when they first met Abe Hyley.

His bearded face seemed to be innocent of all acquaintance with water, and his tangled black hair seemed never to have known a comb, and his clothes were a queer mixture of rags and skins, and he had an old hunting-rifle similar to that which Abe Hyley had carried.

He was unquestionably a brute, but appeared to be an utterly ignorant and stupid, and in that a good-natured and well-meaning brute.

"W'ot be you'ns doin' 'bout yer?" he asked, in response to the salutations of the party.

"Just hunting and looking at the country," answered Powell.

"W'ot's that thing you come in?"

"That is a steamboat."

"I heern tell o' them things, but never see one afore. I got wind o' you'ns down the water, and see that thing a-smokin', and I lowed mebbe you mought be burnin' up, and so I kem to ax, though I was kinder skeered o' the crittur."

"We are all safe, thank you, and the boat is quite harmless. Do you live near by?"

"Kinder so. Do you'ns want a man to show yer 'bout yer?"

"Why, yes, we would be glad to get a guide, one who knows the country well. What is your name?"

"Jim Summas."

"Summers," suggested Engel.

"Summas I said. I'll come down in the mornin' 'arly and talk 'bout it. Good-night."

"Good-night, Mr. Summers."

He disappeared in the forest suddenly and silently.

"Just like one of the Hyley gang," observed the professor.

"But he is only one man," answered Powell, "and he seems to want to be friendly."

Sam Startle had seen some ducks about to alight not far up the lagoon, and he wanted to go and try to get some of them.

He was allowed to do so, and he took the dinghy and a light repeating carbine which Powell had purchased for him at Coahoula, promising to return when supper was ready.

A few swift strokes in the still water took him out of sight beyond a bend.

The others busied themselves in preparing the camp and building a fire for cooking purposes, their camping-ground being within sight and easy reach of the launch which was, in fact, less than two rods from them.

While they were thus employed they were startled by the sound of a strange voice proceeding from the boat.

Looking in that direction, they saw four men standing at the side of the launch, with four rifles leveled at the surveying party.

How those men could have got there without being seen or heard was beyond comprehension.

CHAPTER XVI.

A TERRIBLE NIGHT.

SAM STARTLE, as has been said, pulled away swiftly in the dinghy, and was soon out of sight of the camp where he had left his comrades.

The shades of night were falling, and on the quiet lagoon, shadowed by the moss-hung branches of giant trees, it was already dark.

That peculiar piece of water, part of a chain or series of lakes, was very irregular in shape, at times spreading out until it fairly deserved the name of a lake, and again narrowing until

it was scarcely more than wide enough to permit the passage of a launch.

Here it would make an unexpected and unnecessary bend, showing a disposition to double on itself, and there what appeared to be the main arm would run off into the woods, only to prove itself no thoroughfare by terminating abruptly.

Frequently had the party on the Wave followed those false leads, and had been compelled to retrace their steps and make an effort in another direction.

Sam had learned pretty thoroughly the peculiarities of those inland waters; but was not bothering himself about them just then.

He had a certain point to reach and a definite object to gain, and his simple task was attended with no difficulty.

Keeping in his mind the bearing of the point toward which the ducks had appeared to tend, he went to that point as directly as the sinuosities of the lagoon would allow him to go.

He reached it easily enough, but was disappointed in the purpose that had brought him there, as the ducks had not yet settled down, and his arrival frightened them away.

He went further on, to take the chance of meeting them when they made another attempt to alight, but was again disappointed.

Similar wariness on the part of the birds and beasts of that region had been one of the signs which led his friends to suspect the presence of human beings about there.

Satisfied that he would get no further chance at them, he turned to keep the promise he had made of a speedy return.

As he rounded the last bend and came in sight of the camp, he looked about to glance at his course, and saw a light that surprised him and for the moment almost stupefied him.

The fire which his comrades had built was burning brightly, and by its light he saw that they were there; but what was the matter with them?

Two of them were standing up; but there was something about their movements or lack of movements which induced the belief that they were not the masters of their actions.

This belief was at once confirmed by the fact that they were not alone, as other men were there who seemed to have control of them.

Sam's mind was quick to act, and he immediately jumped to the conclusion that the camp had been captured during his absence, as it had been by the Hyleys.

Of this fact he was fully informed by a voice, unmistakably the voice of Rush Powell, which came to him loud and clear, warning him of danger.

"Go back, Sam! Go back!"

The next instant one of the men at the camp struck out, and a heavy blow was followed by the fall of the engineer.

"Come on!" shouted another. "It's all right!"

But Sam had already whirled the dinghy around, and the voice was the voice of a stranger, and he was not deceived by it.

Directly a shot was fired, and then another and another; but the bullets that struck the water near him only emphasized Rush Powell's warning and put more vigor into his arm.

Very speedily his swift strokes carried him around the bend and took him out of sight of the camp again, and then he paused for a moment to consider what he should do.

Of course he must continue his flight, but whither, and for what purpose beyond that of flight?

The instinct of self-preservation naturally prompted him to escape; but there was another and perhaps a stronger feeling that animated him just then, and that was the hope that he might be able to aid his comrades.

No doubt they had been captured, as at first occurred to him, just as they had been by the Hyleys, by a sudden surprise; but this time there had been no sort of a warning, nor was there anything to indicate the object of the raiders.

On the former occasion he had been left out of the scrape because he was away with August Engel when the camp was captured, and they had succeeded after a struggle in rescuing their friends.

Now he had not the skill and strength of the professor to guide and take the lead and do the most of the desperate work; and what could he hope to accomplish a one?

In the dinghy he might be able to keep out of the way of the enemy and move about with ease and celerity; but how could he hope, in an attempt to reach his friends, to elude the vigilance of those silent and secret foes, who flitted like shadows through the forest, and whose presence was only betrayed by the blows they struck.

He had his repeating carbine, and he knew how to use it; but it had already been twice proved that the best weapons could not avail against the noiseless methods of the wily swamper.

Just one thing was clear to him then—whatever he might or might not be able to do, the first and pressing necessity was to secure his own safety.

This he proposed to do by keeping on up the

lagoon and rowing close to the side opposite to that on which the camp was located, until he could consider himself safe from pursuit.

Even if he should be seen by the enemy, they would not attempt to fire upon him in the darkness, and he would have time to rest and reflect and form plans for future action.

As he sculled along, making as little noise as possible, he became aware of the fact that there was a strong smell of smoke in the air, which every moment became stronger and more pungent, and before long was accompanied by a roaring noise that also increased rapidly.

Looking about for the cause of the smell and the noise, he perceived a lurid light at the westward, and was soon convinced that a fire had caught in the forest, which was spreading and running swiftly, as such fires always do.

Sam had never had any experience of forest fires, but he had heard them spoken of in the surveying party, and understood pretty well their perils and the means of avoiding them.

He perceived, much to his delight, that the fire seemed to be considerably below him, and judged that it was working its way down the lagoon.

Therefore he believed that he would be able, by holding his present course, to keep well out of the way of danger, and he was sure that the fire could not cross the water and reach his friends and foes on the other side.

He might expect to be driven somewhat further from the captured camp than he had expected to go; but that would perhaps not be an unmixed evil.

Having passed the points where he had looked for the ducks, he found himself out of his latitude, and then two very untoward events transpired.

The rushing and raging fire, as forest fires are wont to do, suddenly started out in a new direction, having probably found a reach of dry grass and stubble and brushwood that gave it a good chance to spread, and perhaps being influenced by a change in the wind.

It happened, also, that Sam, prevented by the darkness and the bother of the smoke from picking and choosing his way as well as he might otherwise have done, had run his dinghy into one of the branches of the lagoon at a point where it was not easily distinguishable from the main body.

Though narrow at the entrance, it widened after he had gone into it a little distance, and at its termination formed a small and nearly circular pond.

When Sam got to this point he quickly perceived that he had reached the end of his tether, as there was no thoroughfare for him in that direction.

No sooner had he discovered his error than he also discovered something else, and this discovery was a very unpleasant one, as he perceived that the fire was suddenly and unexpectedly rushing right at him.

Clearly that was a good place to get out of, and he hastily turned the dinghy with the intention of pulling back to the lagoon.

As he did so, a heavy crash forced upon him another discovery, and he saw a tall tree fall across the mouth of the branch, completely cutting off his escape by water.

An attempt to escape by land was out of the question, as the fire was already bursting and jumping across the branch where the tree had fallen; so there was nothing for it but to stay where he was, and he considered himself lucky in having that much of water space, small though it was, between him and the flames.

He had no time to reflect upon the situation, as the fire was upon him, and what he could do to save himself must be done immediately.

In a few minutes the little pond would be nearly surrounded by it, and he would be no better off at one side than at the other; he therefore placed the dinghy in the middle of the basin, believing that it would stay there, as there was no current to move it from its position.

Fortunately there was a blanket in the little boat, which had been left there by the forgetfulness of one of his comrades, and he at once struck upon a way of using it.

As the smoke grew denser and the heat greater, he dipped the blanket in the water, wetting it thoroughly, and threw it over him, completely covering his whole form, especially his head and hands, and leaving very little space for breathing purposes.

Then he crouched down in the boat, waiting for the storm of fire to pass over.

He speedily perceived by the crackling and roaring of the flames that they had invaded the banks, and he was obliged to close up the breathing space he had left to prevent himself from being smothered.

Then he had a strange and startling experience, which at first he could not comprehend, but which was finally forced upon him with fearful distinctness.

Under the blanket he heard a splashing about him in the water—first one, then another and another, and then an almost continuous splashing, as if a number of *somebodies* were jumping into the basin in all directions.

He knew of no savage wild beasts in that re-

gion—nothing more dangerous than the reptiles; but those were numerous enough, and it was possible that even they might do him great damage by upsetting the dinghy.

Every now and then the little boat was jarred as if something struck against it, and occasionally one end or the other was strangely lifted up, giving the occupant very peculiar and uncomfortable sensations.

He felt that the water had entirely evaporated from the blanket, allowing the smoke and the heat to penetrate to him, and it was to be feared that the dry and hairy surface might catch fire; hence it had become an absolute necessity that he must give it another good wetting.

For this purpose he threw it off suddenly, intending to dip it in the basin and cover himself again instantly; but the sight that was disclosed to him by his first glance nearly paralyzed him and rendered him incapable of action.

He was surrounded by a wall of flame, in the midst of a furnace of fire; but that was not the worst of it.

The basin was alive and literally crowded with reptiles of every description, from the largest alligators to the smallest serpents that infested the woods and swamps.

So thickly were the alligators jammed and packed into that small space that they could scarcely stir, and it was doubtless to this fact that the dinghy owed its immunity from upsetting.

Their presence had raised the water to a level with the bank, and the intervals between alligators, so to speak, were filled with snakes, and above all with the dangerous and dreaded moccasins.

Sam would hardly have believed there were so many moccasin snakes in existence.

He had only a glance at this menagerie; but the glance was more than enough, as it filled him with horror if not with terror.

To save himself from being stifled by the heat and smoke, it was necessary to wet the blanket immediately, and he did so hastily but resolutely, choosing the clearest spot he could see, and fearing to excite a commotion among the alligators or to pick up one of the snakes.

Fortunately they were so occupied with their own preservation, or so frightened by the fire, that they took no notice of the lad or his act.

He succeeded in wetting the blanket, though not so thoroughly as he would have wished to, and covered himself with it again, a feeling of nausea taking hold of him as he did so.

That he conquered, and drew the blanket over his head closely, and dropped down in the bottom of the boat, almost in a swooning condition.

Half-stupefied he lay there, scarcely able to breathe, and having no idea of how the time passed or of what was going on about him, except when an unusually heavy bumping of the boat, or an unusually extensive lifting of one end or the other, recalled him to a sense of the perils of his position, and produced in him again the peculiar and unpleasant feelings which he had experienced when that sort of thing began.

At last he involuntarily made an opening in the folds of the blanket through which he could breathe more freely, and then he fell asleep.

He was awakened by a sensation of oppressive heat, and threw off the blanket to look about him; but the sensation had been produced by the heat of his own body during his sleep, and he perceived that he no longer needed protection from the flames and smoke.

The forest fire had nearly burned itself out at that part of its course, though its remnants were still smoldering and smoking on the banks and beyond.

The number of alligators in the basin had sensibly diminished, and by the light of the points of fire that were left he could see the snakes nosing at the bank and warily wriggling up it, as if anxious to return to the haunts from which they had been driven.

With a great effort Sam took one of the oars from its place, drove it down into the mud, and tied the dinghy to it; then he laid down in the bottom of the boat to sleep in earnest, and then his slumber was sound and refreshing.

It was the sun that awoke him in the morning, and when he sat up and looked about he perceived that the basin was clear and undisturbed, with no vestige visible of the menagerie of the previous night.

Thankful for his escape, he prepared for departure.

Pulling down to the mouth of the branch, he discovered that the narrow passage was still blocked up; but it was an easy matter for him to mount the trunk of the fallen tree, pull the dinghy up on it, and launch it on the other side.

Then with a sigh of relief he floated out on the lagoon. Well had he earned the sobriquet of Salamander Sam, as he was thereafter called, through all that region where his terrible adventure became known.

CHAPTER XVII.

DISGRACED AND IMPRISONED.

A MORE surprised, astonished, and utterly confounded trio of men than Rush Powell and his comrades when they were captured within

reach of their launch it would be difficult ever to discover.

It may also be safely asserted that a more deeply humiliated set of human beings could scarcely exist.

Their sense of shame and disgrace in connection with this easy capture was such that there was no room for fear, and Powell and Boney Priddle would have rushed madly upon their foes in an insane desire to exterminate them, if it had not been for the cool and warning voice of August Engel, who cautioned them to stay where they were and keep cool.

Their rifles, and even their revolvers, had been left on the launch, and they were quite defenseless against the four hunting-rifles that threatened them.

The launch had been within such easy reach of their camping-place, and the possibility of any force springing up between them and the water had been so utterly out of the question, that they gave no thought to the point of securing their arms.

So there was nothing for them to do but to yield quietly and submit to the demands that might be made upon them, mentally reserving the right to strike if they should get a chance to deal an effective blow.

Though the difficulty with the Hyleys was still fresh in their memories, they had forgotten or overlooked the secret and silent methods of the swamper, who moved as noiselessly as snakes and struck as viciously.

While they were preparing the camp and building the fire they were continually passing to and from the Wave, and hardly a moment elapsed when it was not under the eyes of at least one of them; yet their enemies had crept, unseen and unheard, into the position of vantage, appearing before them as suddenly as if they had risen out of the ground.

Foremost among them was Jim Summers, whose recent brief visit to the camp had evidently been that of a spy, preparatory to the intended stroke.

He it was who gave the orders that completed the capture of the Wave's party.

One of his comrades stepped up to the surveyors while the rest continued to cover them with the hunting rifles.

This man was well supplied with thongs of deerskin, with which he secured the captives singly by tying their hands behind their backs, beginning with Rush Powell, who had been the spokesman and appeared to be the leader of the party.

At the same time he searched them for concealed weapons, even taking from them their pocket-knives.

Then the leader came forward, and Powell attempted to take him to task for his treacherous behavior.

"What do you mean?" demanded the engineer. "What harm have we done to you or any of your people? You came to us a while ago as a friend, and we welcomed you and treated you as a friend. You even wanted to act as our guide."

"Wal, ain't I gwine ter guide yer?" replied the swamper. "That's wot I'm yer' fur. Jest wait and see whar I guide yer to—that's all."

Jim Summers looked about, as if searching for some person who was not visible.

Powell knew well enough what he was looking for, but waited for him to speak, and presently he did so.

"Whar's the boy?"

"There is no boy," answered Rush, and the statement was true enough at that time.

"Thar was a boy, though. 'Tain't no use lyin' to me, mister. Didn't I come yer' afo' and hain't I got eyes? Whar's the boy gone ter?"

"If you know so much, you ought to know that," answered Rush.

He perceived that the swamper had been so occupied by the business of crawling up quietly to effect the capture of the camp, that they had not noticed the departure of Sam.

"Thar was a leetle canoe in tow of the big 'un," resumed the leader. "That's gone, too. The boy's gone, and the canoe's gone, and they went together. He's gone off on the water."

Evidently Mr. "Jim Summers" had a logical mind.

"Whar's the boy gone ter?" he demanded. "When'll he git back?"

None of the captives were disposed to furnish him with any information on these points, and they could only hope that some way might be found by which Sam could escape from this gang.

Was this one of Morley Plympton's schemes to get rid of the heir who stood in his way?

Though they had considered themselves far beyond his range and out of his reach, Powell was inclined to believe that he might be responsible for the attack.

They had not at first thought of him in connection with the Hyley difficulty, but subsequent indications had led them to suspect that he might have had a hand in that.

On this occasion, as on that one, Sam happened to be out of the way when the blow was struck; but it must be admitted that his chances for escape were less than they had then been.

"No matter whar he's gone ter. He's bound

ter be comin' back, and then we'll git him. We'll wait."

They had not long to wait, and their confident expectation was not disappointed.

Shortly the sound of Sam Startle's sculls was heard, and then the dim light shot into view as it rounded the bend above.

Fortunately for him the swamper had not concealed themselves, and the blazing camp-fire set their figures in strong relief against the darkness of the forest.

They could not have gone out of sight without taking their captives with them, and that circumstance must equally have awakened the lad's suspicions.

Rush Powell was determined to do what he could to save his young friend, and at the right moment he knocked the hopes of the swamper in the head with his warning cry.

Scarcely had the words escaped his lips when Jim Summers, who was angry enough to eat him, struck him with all the force of his right arm, and the man's fist was like iron.

The engineer fell as if he had been shot, and Sam Startle got away in the darkness, in spite of the shots that were fired at him and the vain attempt to deceive him.

"That was your fault, dod-durn you!" grumbled Jim Summers, administering a malicious kick to Rush Powell as he was slowly arising.

He jerked the dazed engineer to his feet, and steadied him there with another kick.

"Ef it hadn't been fur you, the boy would ha' come on, and you'll have to pay fur that. He can't git fur away, and we'll 'light on him afo' long. You said you wanted me to guide yer, and you'll see how I'm gwine ter do it. Bring 'em along, fellers."

Jim Summers took the advance, and the three prisoners were led away through the forest to an open space about a quarter of a mile from the water, partly glade and partly clearing, the existence of which the Wave party had not suspected.

In this open space was an old log building, which seemed to have been intended for a barn or stable, and at some time in the past used for such a purpose.

It was near twenty feet high, but was not large, and its breadth was only a third of its length.

At one end was a low doorway, closed by a door made of heavy slabs and hung on wooden hinges, which opened outwardly.

As the party halted in front of this building, some of them began to sniff at the air, which had lately been loaded with a pungent odor, and to gaze in the direction from which the breeze blew.

Soon they caught sight through the trees of a light at the westward, and they knew well enough what was the matter.

"The woods is afire over yonder," observed the leader, "and it's apt to make a clean sweep. This side o' the water is safe, I reckon; but that boy 'll be in a pickle unless he's a salamander. Ef the fire don't wipe him out, it'll be easy fur us to pick him up."

When the captives had been conducted into the log building, they were seated on the earthen floor, and, as a measure of further precaution, their feet were tied with thongs.

Jim Summers gave them a parting admonition.

"All thet you'ns hev got to do is to stay put right whar you are. We won't none of us be fur away, and ef you try to git out, it'll be wuss fur yer."

He followed his comrades outside, and the door was closed and fastened there.

The three men of the Wave party, when they were left to themselves, had not much to say about their ignominious surprise and capture.

To that subject they could not begin to do justice; but they could discuss the question of the possible escape or capture of Sam Startle, the only member of the party who was left at large.

"It is my opinion," said Rush Powell, "that Morley Plympton is at the bottom of this business. I am almost sure that he was responsible for our affair with the Hyleys, and there is no doubt that he has been hand and glove with more than one of the gangs that run wild in the woods and swamps."

"Suppose you are right," observed Engel, "what then?"

"If this is Morley Plympton's work, we may presume that Sam is what those men are after, and that our capture is only incidental to the object of getting rid of him. Though Plympton has a grudge against me, I doubt if he would carry it to the extent of getting me killed. But Sam stands between him and a fortune."

"It's a good thing that he was away when we were gobbled up," remarked Boney Priddle.

"But can he keep out of the way? That is the question. Even if he should escape those swamper, who are like wild beasts on the trail of their prey, what would become of him? How could he live or find his way to any settlement? It is more than likely, too, Sam being what he is, that he will not try to get far away, but will hang about here in the hope of finding us and helping us. Of course he can't accomplish any-

thing in that way, and the fear is that he will only succeed in getting himself caught."

"Be not too sure of that, my friend," broke in the professor. "Sam Startle is no fool. Indeed, he lacks every one of the elements that go to make up the ordinary fool. You must remember that I was out with him at the time of the Hyley affair, and that I had a good chance to judge of his style and the resources of his nature. Man is a complex being—"

"Cut it short, professor," demurred Boney.

"The short of it is, then, that you owed your rescue on that occasion quite as much to Sam Startle as to me, and I am convinced that if I had not had his ready and intelligent help, I would have been of little use to you. I have no doubt, Rush, that you are right in saying that he, instead of selfishly seeking to save himself, will remain near here and try to do something for us."

"The fire may ketch him," suggested Boney.

"No fear of that. With a boat and plenty of water, he will have sense enough to keep out of the fire. If there were two of him, we might count with certainty on being saved from the consequences of our carelessness."

"But there is only one of him," mournfully remarked Powell.

"Only one, and therefore I say that for his sake as well as our own we ought to waste no more time here in useless regrets or idle talk, but go to work and try to help him. To do that, the first thing necessary is to get out of this den."

"The leader of the gang told us," objected Boney, "that if we tried that game it would be wuss for us."

"It cannot be much worse. They might as well kill us as deprive us of our boat and our arms. Without those we would be as bad off in this wilderness as a fly in the middle of a pond."

"That's what's the matter. Those folks have got all our guns now. What can we do without our tools?"

"You are beginning at the wrong end of the business, Boney. Let us start at the right end, and when we have got hold of that we will see what is next to be done. Guns or no guns, we shall be eternally disgraced if we allow those ignorant and brutish swamp suckers to get the better of us, and for my part I cannot rest patiently for a moment under what they have already done. The first thing is to get out of this den, and we ought to succeed in that without much difficulty, if they leave us a little time to work."

"That is what we are likely to have," observed Powell. "They have either gone to hunt Sam, or are bothering themselves to find out the works and ways of the Wave, and neither of those jobs is likely to be finished in a hurry. Come, Boney, we must try to get near each other, and then you may have some deerskin for your supper."

"Come and give me a chaw, then," requested Boney.

Rush Powell succeeded in working his way to the fat man and backing up to him, when he offered the thongs with which his hands were bound to the sharp teeth of his comrade.

Boney started into the task with an appetite; but, as the thongs had been knotted and reknotted, and it was no easy matter to make an impression on the tough deerskin, the work was not to be done as speedily as the captives hoped it would be.

They had, however, the consolation of knowing that if one of them could get his hands free, he would soon be able to release the others.

Boney was still chewing vigorously at the deerskin when the voices of the swamper were heard outside.

The work was stopped at once, and Powell tumbled back to his place as quickly as he could.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BONEY PRIDDLE IN A FIX.

THE door was opened from the outside, and the four swamper came filing in.

Rush Powell was glad to see that they were all there and that Sam Startle was not with them.

He judged that they had not yet captured the lad, but wanted to satisfy himself on that point, and spoke up as soon as he recognized Jim Summers in the darkness.

"Did you find the boy you spoke of?" he inquired.

"Naw," answered Summers, gruffly. "We ain't botherin' 'bout no boy. The woods is all burnin' up over thar, and ef the fire don't git him, we'll be sart'in to ketch him when we git ready. Jest now we wanter know how to work that keenoo o' yourn."

"Keenoo?" repeated Rush. "What keenoo?"

"That boat—a stamboat, as you'ns called it. The thing that goes by smoke."

"If you are anxious to investigate that matter, Mr. Summers," observed Rush, "I am willing to go and show you how the thing works."

He doubtless thought that if he should be free-handed and on the launch, he might find a chance to "make a break"; but his aspirations

in that direction were speedily choked off by the leader.

"No yer don't, mister. I don't want you, dod-durn yer! You're too rotten smart. I want one o' t'others."

"Which one?" inquired Engel, probably hoping that the chance might fall to him.

"Not you, nuther. When the thing was comin' up the water I see a fat man a-workin' it. We'll take that fat feller and make him show us how it works. He's got to do it, too, or the 'gators 'll git him mighty quick."

The "fat man" who was mentioned, and who could not pretend to doubt that he was the one they wanted, was not enthusiastically appreciative of the honor conferred upon him.

He was doubtless quite as willing as the others were to sacrifice himself for his friends, but was of the opinion that either the colonel or the professor could manage the matter better than he could, and find a safer way out of the scrape.

They were decidedly of the same opinion, and each would have been glad to give him a word of advice or caution before he left them; but no chance was offered them.

Boney was led away like a sheep to the slaughter, and the swamper filed out again and fastened the door on the outside.

The "fat feller" was no coward, having proved himself on many occasions, before and since he joined the surveyors, a man of courage and nerve; but, though passably witty, he was not quick-witted.

He was well aware of the fact that his sluggish brain was not the best thing in the world for an emergency, and that he needed somebody to go ahead and pick out the way, in order to bring his full powers into play.

The quick wit of Powell, or the ready resource of Engel, would have speedily hit upon a means of outwitting the swamper and turning the tables on them, and it was really a pity that one of his comrades had not been chosen for the responsibility of this occasion.

Though Boney Priddle was not a bit afraid of the ordeal, he did not relish the idea of furnishing to the river reptiles such a famous feast of fat things, and, as he had missed his supper, he actually fell to envying the alligators the meal they would make of him.

From the last remark it is reasonable to infer that he did not mean to show the swamper how to run the Wave, and that was exactly the state of the case.

Whatever thoughts might come into his head, there was no room there for such an idea as that.

He had not formed any plan, and confessed himself incapable of forming a plan to defeat their ends or get himself out of the scrape; but it was a settled thing in his mind that he would not run the engine for them or assist them in any way.

This determination came to him as naturally as breathing, and was simply a matter of course.

When he left the log house with his guards, the air was heavy with smoke, and he had only to cast his eyes toward the west to see that a big forest fire was raging there and sweeping everything before it.

It was a fearful sight; but the swamper seemed to feel no uneasiness about it, as they were doubtless sure that the fire would not cross the water and reach them.

They said nothing to Boney, and he said nothing to them, as he was so entirely occupied with cudgeling his brain for an idea, that he had no time to waste in words.

They led him directly to the Wave, which was still tied up at the bank where she had been landed, with her fires out.

When he had been allowed to step aboard, Jim Summers abruptly ordered him to "make the thing go."

The tone of the swamper was so positive and peremptory, that the alternative of feeding the alligators was clearly presented to the prisoner.

He had not as yet succeeded in getting hold of what he might call an idea; but it occurred to him that he would surely not be able to do anything for himself with his hands tied, and must be free before he could take advantage of any chance that might offer.

"You must untie me, then," he remarked, as he seated himself on a box.

"Nary time," declared the leader. "We ain't takin' no chance."

"How can I make it work, then?"

"Jest set right thar, and tell us w'ot to do. You'd better tell it straight as a line, too, or over you go to the 'gators."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, this seemed very funny to Boney Priddle, and it was as much as he could do to keep his face straight while he framed his answer.

"Here goes, then. Cock up your ears and listen for all you're worth. The first thing to do is to build a fire in the furnace; then start the feed pump, examine the stopcocks, attach the parabolic curve to the safety valve, and adjust the screw at a tangent with the shaft."

He had caught a number of words from the surveyors, and used them as they happened to come into his head.

The swamper stared at him and looked at

each other, their countenances expressive of the utter impossibility of understanding that rigmarole.

Like a child with a new plaything, they forgot all the other objects that might have been included in their capture of the camp, and could think of nothing else until they found out "how the thing worked."

"Wot-a he talkin' 'bout?" demanded the leader.

His comrades shook their heads, plainly intimating that the talk was too much for them.

"I'm talkin' about how to make the thing go," remarked Boney. "That's what you said I'd have to tell, and I've told it as straight as a string. If you don't understand it, that's no fault of mine. You can't begin to make the thing stir unless I show you, and I can't show you while my hands are tied."

Conviction of the truth of this statement was forced through the thick skulls of the swampers, and they proceeded to remove the bonds from their prisoner's hands.

Why should they not? He was but one man, while they were four, and he was unarmed, while they were well supplied with weapons.

Boney rubbed his hands, chafed his wrists, while he looked about in the hope of catching another idea.

"Why don'tcher make it go?" demanded Summers.

"Thar's no wood," was the prompt reply.

"I'll go and cut some."

But he was not to be trusted ashore, especially with an ax in his hands, and two of the swampers went to get the wood.

"That won't do at all," said Boney, when the first lot was brought to him.

"Wot's the matter with it?" inquired Summers.

"It's green. Must have dry wood to start the fire."

"Why didn't you tell us that afo'? You'd better go straight, old fatty, or you'll git hurt."

The two men went for dry wood, and soon returned with a load of it.

"It's too big and too long," objected Boney.

Jim Summers turned upon the prisoner savagely.

"That's gone twice," he growled. "It won't go again. Why didn't you tell us afo' wot kinder wood you wanted?"

"You've got me skeered," meekly answered the prisoner. "Sometimes I don't seem to know just what I'm doin'."

"You'd better know. It won't be safe fur you to give us any mo' that sawt o' stuff."

Wood was brought to which Boney could have made no further objection if he had dared to, and the necessity of the case compelled him to start a fire in the little furnace.

He had not the faintest intention of really trying to "make the thing go," but must make a show of doing so, dallying along in the hope that an idea would present itself, or something might happen to "let him out."

When the fire was lighted there was nothing to do but wait for it to burn; but he fancied that he had caught an idea.

It was evident from the appearance and condition of the swampers that they had not discovered the liquor that was included in the stores of the Wave.

Indeed, it was stowed away where they would not be likely to find it except on a thorough examination of the contents of the craft.

Why should he not bring it out, induce them to drink, and take advantage of their possible intoxication?

The Hyleys had drank themselves into a condition that made them comparatively an easy prey, and the same thing might happen to these brutes.

There were three repeating-rifles in sight in the launch, and the swampers, not knowing how to use them, had let them alone.

If they should become stupid enough to let him get hold of one of those rifles, he might do "right smart" execution among them.

No sooner had this idea occurred to Boney than he gave it a trial.

"Thar's some whisky here, fellers," he remarked. "Hain't you found it yet?"

"Where is it?" eagerly inquired Jim Summers.

Boney brought out a quart flask, and begged the privilege of tasting it to assure them that it was not "sure enough prison."

The swampers allowed this, but hastened to pounce on the bottle and sample its contents, which they found so much to their taste that they continued the sampling until the flask was nearly empty.

Boney Priddle viewed these proceedings with pleasure, believing that his captors were unaccustomed to liquor, and might get drunk before they knew what they were about.

That was not the idea of Jim Summers, who shortly called a halt on the consumption of whisky.

"Drop it now, boys!" was his order. "I reckon thar's plenty more whar that kem from, and we don't need to drink it all up to oncet."

Then he turned to Boney and renewed his command to "make the thing go."

The fat man had been considering the situation

to the best of his ability, but was compelled to admit that if the whisky scheme failed to work he would be at his row's end.

What should he do next?

He might burst the boiler and seriously damage the swampers, the boat and himself; but would that pay?

Without the launch his friends would be in a bad fix, even if they were free, and he could not find it in his heart to destroy the Wave, except at the very last extremity.

His only chance was to dally and hope for good effects from the whisky.

He unloaded the safety-valve, and arranged the exhaust so that the steam would escape as fast as it was made, and even took the precaution to remove certain portions of the machinery without which the engine could not work with plenty of steam.

These dilatory proceedings naturally annoyed and irritated the swampers, and the leader was evidently suspicious, with good cause, that they were intended to be dilatory.

Again he turned upon the prisoner and wanted to know why he did not "make the thing go."

"I'm doin' the best I can," answered Boney, a little sharply.

"You've got to do better, and do it mighty sudden, too. Look over thar"—pointing to the dark water. "The 'gators is waitin' fur you thar. Do you want to go to 'em?"

The humor of the situation again took possession of Boney Priddle.

"Well, I dunno," he mildly answered. "I never tried it, and can't say how I might like it. It would be a big thing for the 'gators, though."

This flippant reply produced an astonisher from Jim Summers in the shape of a blow that knocked the fat man sprawling in the bottom of the boat.

Several vicious and vigorous kicks were administered to him as he lay there, and the poor fellow had a very bad three minutes.

When he managed to rise, he was greeted with another and more peremptory order to "make the thing work."

"I can't do it, gov'nor, and that's a fact," Boney meekly admitted. "Somethin's the matter with the durned thing. It's all out o' gear."

"Fix it, then."

"I dunno how. The solid truth is, gov'nor, that you've got holt o' the wrong man. I never run this machine. One o' the bosses ran it, and I only cut the wood and built the fire and that sort o' thing."

"Why didn't you tell us that afo'?" demanded the leader.

"You wouldn't let me. One o' the bosses offered to come, but you wouldn't let him and took me. You'll have to get another man."

"Which one? Him as spoke up 'bout the boy?"

"Not him—t'other one," answered Boney, who well remembered the professor's performance as a rescuer, and hoped to see it repeated.

It was clear that the swampers would have to take Boney's advice or feed him to the alligators, and perhaps, both plans might be adopted.

While they finished the flask of whisky they discussed the question, and that was the conclusion at which they arrived.

After taking the precaution to tie Boney hand and foot so that he could not stir, they started off toward the log house as the day began to break.

CHAPTER XIX.

SALAMANDER CHIPS IN.

RUSH POWELL and August Engel had not been idle while their friend and factotum was suffering for their sakes.

"That is a great pity," said the professor when the door was closed between them and Boney. "If they had taken either of us, the man who was taken might have found a chance to do something; but I am afraid that poor Boney will only have a hard time and accomplish nothing."

"If he suffers in proportion to his size," observed Rush, "he will surely have a hard time."

"What will happen then?" continued the professor. "If they force him to teach them to run the boat, or to run it for them, the chances are that the concern will be blown to bits. If not, they will get it away from here, and in either event we will lose our rifles and all the rest of our property."

"If that should prove to be the case, there would be a good chance for our safety and for Sam's. But you are mistaken in Boney, August. You ought to know him better. He may not be as ready of resource as some people; but he is as true as steel and as stubborn as a live-oak knurl. I should be willing to bet my life that they will kill him before they get him to run the Wave for them, or to show them how to run her."

"It is quite likely that you are right. If that is the case, we had better hurry up and try to get out of this, as that is our only chance to help him."

"Back up here, then, August, and let me gnaw your thongs."

"No, my boy. I fancy that I have the better teeth, and the work on yours has begun. Give me a chance at them."

Powell backed up to the professor, who started into the task of chewing deerskin with energy and determination.

The job was a tough and long one; but the thongs were finally gnawed through sufficiently to allow the prisoner to remove his hands from behind his back and use them freely.

Then he speedily untied his legs and cast loose Engel, after which the latter relieved his friend of the knots that remained on his wrists.

What should they do next?

They tried the door, but it was securely fastened on the outside, and there was nothing in the building with which they could batter it down.

"We will do the next best thing," said August. "If we can't get out by the door, we can keep them from coming in that way, and that may be worth something to us."

His quick and inventive mind had already discovered the means by which this object could be accomplished, and he secured the door to the logs on the inside by using the thongs with which he and his friends had been bound.

This task completed, and it also had taken considerable time, they turned their attention to the roof as the only means of exit left them.

"I wonder what they are doing to poor Boney now," murmured the professor.

"I don't like to guess," answered Powell; "but, if I could get there, and should catch them in the act of worrying him, I believe I would jump at them, just dry so."

"I am decidedly of the opinion, Rush, that it is our turn to sneak up and get the better of those pig-headed brutes."

"Let us get out, then, and we may worry them some."

Getting out did not prove to be such an easy matter as they had supposed it would be before they had got rid of their bonds.

From what they had been able to see of the roof they had supposed it to be a thin and rotten affair, through which they could easily force a way; but closer inspections and trials showed them that they were mistaken on that point.

They climbed the log walls, and were disappointed in what they found there.

It is true that the roof was composed only of cypress shingles or "boards," split out by hand in backwoods style; but they were long and heavy, and there was nothing in the building with which the prisoners could batter them off.

After awhile Engel succeeded in finding a weak place, tore off some shingles, and thrust his head through the opening.

"It is broad daylight, Rush," said he.

"We must hurry and get out, then."

But they did not hurry and get out, as a sudden change came over the scene that was presented to the view of August Engel.

"Get down, Rush!" he sharply ordered. "We must give it up. The swampers are coming."

They both scrambled down, looking blank enough over this bad piece of news.

What were their captors coming back for, and what was to be the next move in the game?

They did not bring Boney Priddle back with them, and it was reasonable to suppose that the fat man, having refused to do their bidding, had been murdered for his obstinacy.

In that event it was probable that they were coming back to get one of the others and compel him to perform the task.

Either Powell or Engel would have been glad enough to go in place of Boney when he was taken; but afterward they were not so anxious.

Daylight had arrived, and they were lost, and their chances might be much better if they could keep out of the clutches of the swampers.

As they had fastened the door on the inside, they would try to keep out their enemies, at least until they could make terms with them.

Their suspicions were soon confirmed by the arrival of their captors, who kicked at the door of the log building after they discovered that it would not open.

This expedient failing, they yelled to those inside.

At the suggestion of August Engel the prisoners made no answer; but they could easily hear all that was said outside.

"They've got out an' gone away," observed one of the swampers.

"Nary time!" shouted Jim Summers. "I know jest wot sawt o' trick they're up to. Open the do' thar, dog-on you, or we'll bust it open."

This threat produced no response, and the swampers started to find a log to serve as a battering-ram.

As they walked away from the building, one of them looked back and saw something.

"They's out an' gone," said he. "Thar's a hole in the roof."

"Would they ha' tied the door an' gone out at the roof?" fiercely demanded Jim Summers.

"We'll bust the door in, anyhow."

Sam Startle floated out on the lagoon in the early morning.

When he pulled his dinghy over the fallen tree and launched it on the open water, he did not begin to know what he was going to do; but he at once set his sharp and active mind at work upon the problem, and his ideas became clear and definite.

As for leaving his friends in the lurch and seeking to make good his own escape, he was so far from considering that point that it did not once occur to him.

On the westward side of the lagoon the forest was all burnt over to the water's edge, offering scanty shelter and still heated ground; but he cared nothing for that side, as his comrades must be in the other direction.

It was his first duty and greatest desire to discover what had become of them, and then he would study what he could do to help them.

From where he then was he might make a circuit through the forest and come around at the rear of the spot where they had been captured; but there was a chance of getting lost, and he did not want to leave his boat until he could see his way more clearly.

He decided that he would sneak along the eastern shore, keeping as close to the bank and as much under cover as possible, until he could look around the bend below and reconnoiter the situation.

To carry out this plan quietly and effectively, he removed both of the oars of the dinghy from their swivels, and used one of them as a paddle, so that the noise of rowing should not announce his approach to the enemy.

So he slipped down the lagoon silently and slowly, but as swiftly as he cared to go, and shoved the nose of the dinghy out to the head of the bend.

There lay the camp, or the place where the camp had been started, and it was pointed out to him plainly by the launch which still lay there at the bank.

There was nobody about—a belief which soon became a certainty and made the lad's heart jump.

What had become of the swambers, and what had they done?

Had they murdered their captives, or merely carried them away?

It was a very singular circumstance that smoke was coming out of the little chimney of the Wave, and steam was issuing freely but quietly from her exhaust pipe.

This surely indicated the recent work, if not the immediate presence, of somebody aboard the launch; but there was nobody in sight, and the best use of the lad's keen eyes failed to discover anybody.

There was just one thing for Sam to do. He must get to the wave as speedily as possible, and solve as much of the mystery as he could get hold of in that quarter.

He looked at his carbine, laid it carefully within reach, and paddled across the little bay below the bend, direct to the Wave.

His strokes were swift but noiseless as he sent the dinghy skimming over the smooth water, casting wary glances toward the shore, ready for instant flight or fight at the appearance of an enemy.

He saw nothing and heard nothing, but safely slipped up to the launch at her stern, and made the dinghy fast there.

If the swambers had carried off his friends, they might have left the rifles, and there was no telling what he could not do with them and the boat.

As he was making the dinghy fast he heard a groan inside of the launch, which made him jump up as if he had been shot.

Had one of his companions been left there for dead who was not yet dead?

No, it was Boney Priddle, lying like a bag of meal in the bottom of the boat, his limbs tightly tied and his body and mind in pain, but undoubtedly alive, and apparently sound and strong.

The same glance which conveyed this information to Sam showed him the three rifles of his friends lying where they had been left, and his plan was formed on the instant.

If he and Boney, in possession of those rifles, could not wipe out the swambers, they could at least take hold of the job with a reasonable degree of confidence.

He jumped over into the launch and cut Boney loose with his sharp jack-knife in short order.

Boney was overjoyed as he sat up, but at the same time was bewildered, and Sam at once took upon himself the command and direction of the affair.

"Pulling yourself together, Boney! Jump up and stretch yourself! Put all your wits to work, and be quick about it! Whar's t'others, and whar's been goin' on?"

Prodded and spurred by Sam's quick questioning and impatience of delay, the fat man succeeded in telling the story in so few words that he was astonished at himself.

The colonel and the professor were "over yander," shut up in an old log building. He had been with them there, but had been taken out by the swambers and brought back to the Wave, where they had tried to make him run the engine. He had not run it for them, and they had

started back to the log house to get the professor.

"How long ago?"

"Less'n half an hour."

"Come on, Boney! Pick up one of those rifles and see that it's well loaded and all right, and come quick."

"Better take two," muttered Boney, to whom all his strength and vigor had returned. "What'll we do, Sam?"

"Foller those sneaks and pepper 'em, like the professor and I peppered the Hyleys."

"Good as wheat. Come on!"

Boney was the one who knew the way, and he took the lead, carrying the two rifles, but holding one of them so that he could make it effective instantly.

As for the young salamander, he had become acquainted with his carbine, and stuck to that.

What they had to look out for was the chance of meeting the swambers on their return with the man they had gone to get.

For that chance they looked out sharply, knowing that if they should meet their foes before they could reach their clearing, their advantage would be much diminished, even if they should succeed in effecting a surprise; but they heard nobody and saw nobody until their rapid steps brought them to the edge of the clearing.

CHAPTER XX.

A TRANSFORMATION SCENE.

It was an unexpected state of affairs that presented itself to Sam and Boney as they reached the clearing.

The swambers had doubtless made slow speed after they left the launch, being more or less stupefied by the liquor they had drunk, and so the rapid steps of their pursuers had brought them on the scene in time to take part in the proceedings.

"Stop, Sam!" whispered Boney, as he halted at the edge of the clearing, and drew the lad down under cover of the bushes.

The fat man had not only recovered his strength and vigor, but had all his wits about him, and his powers were not to be despised when they were fully brought into action.

He was not only anxious to help his friends, but eager to get even with the scallawags who had insulted and abused him, threatening to feed him to the alligators, and inflicting upon him no small amount of bodily pain.

Just then he thought he saw his way clear to accomplish both objects, and to that end he was willing to exert every fiber of his being.

The log building was about three hundred feet from where he and his companion were concealed, just a nice and easy range for the magazine rifles, and with nothing at all in the way of good shots and plenty of them.

Near the front of the building the swambers were gathered, but just then a little way from it, and their proceedings and the closed door produced the unexpected state of affairs that has been noted.

Boney perceived that the fastenings had been removed from the door on the outside; but why was it not open, and why had not the swambers gone in?

Clearly because they could not, and this belief was confirmed by the fact that they were evidently seeking a log to be used as a battering-ram.

"Whar's our folks?" whispered Salamander.

"Inside thar," answered Boney. "They've got the cusses shut out."

"Looks to me as if they've gone out, themselves. I see a hole in the roof."

"That's so, Sam. Looks like a new hole, too, and I reckon they made it. But they're in thar. They must ha' got loose the way I started in with the colonel afore I left."

"Then they may have got out. Why not?"

"If they had, Sammy, they'd ha' struck out fur the Wave, sure as shootin'. Mebbe they didn't have time. What would they fasten the door and go out fur? Those skunks know that they're inside, or they wouldn't be foolin' around lookin' fur a way to git in. They want to bust the door down, you see."

"Then I reckon, Boney, they are goin' to git fooled."

"If they knew what's behind 'em, they'd bet thar durned old lousy hide's that that's what's goin' to happen. Gittin' fooled ain't no name fur it, Sam."

The fat man spoke very confidently, and he seemed to be quite secure in his calculations.

He was by all odds the best shot in the surveying party, and the range was all he could ask for, while he was animated by an eager anticipation of revenge that counted for something.

Jim Summers and his followers had found the small trunk of a fallen tree, which they were picking up by the remainder of its jagged limbs, and were about to bear it toward the log house.

"Now's our time," whispered Boney, as he placed one of his rifles at his side and clutched the other eagerly.

He and Sam were crouched behind a cypress log, over which they sighted as they rested the muzzles of their weapons upon it, and a better chance to aim they could not wish.

"Wait till they're straightened up on that log," whispered Boney. "Then we'll git 'em in line and rake the very lives out of 'em."

"Do we need to?" mildly inquired Sam, who shuddered at the thought of such wholesale and cold-blooded slaughter.

"Need to? Well, boy, if you keer to live you need to. It's their life or ourn, and the colonel's life and the professor's, too. Need to? Do we need to kill snakes and 'gators?"

"All right, Boney. I'll shoot as I shot at the Hyleys."

"Wait till I give the word, Sam, and then sling it into 'em fur all you're worth."

Inside of the log house Powell and Engel, ignorant of the proximity of their friends, had hit upon a scheme in which there was some promise, though they admitted that it was a desperate resort.

Perhaps it was the very desperation of this plan that commended it to them and gave it the promise which it seemed to have.

While they were lamenting the lack of weapons or anything that could be used as weapons, and were wondering what they should do when their foes succeeded in forcing a way into the building, it occurred to Rush Powell that the instant of the entrance would be the best time for them to attempt to escape.

Not by breaking away through the enemy, as Engel at first supposed, but simply by climbing the log wall to the hole in the roof which the professor had discovered, and at the proper moment jumping down outside and trusting to their legs.

Watching their persecutors through the cracks of the logs, and noticing when they had found the battering-ram and were about to use it, the prisoners scrambled up to the wall, and Powell looked out at the hole to see what was going on.

The intention was to take advantage of the moment of entrance, and of the surprise of the swambers when they should discover that the building was really empty, and the only point to be feared was the noise of jumping down.

From his elevated position Powell caught sight of something that instantly inspired him with fresh hope, if it did not change his plans.

"August," he eagerly whispered, "I think I see somebody behind a log at the edge of the clearing."

"Impossible?"

"I may be mistaken, but I am almost sure that I see the sun shining on rifle-barrels across the log there."

"It must be Sam and Boney, then."

"Keep quiet and climb up closer to me. Those skunks are coming on with their battering-stick."

Jim Summers and his crew, quite ignorant of what was going on in front of them, and above all, unsuspecting of the deadly preparations in their rear, had picked up the tree-trunk, and were walking with it toward the log house.

Their attention was entirely concentrated upon their burden and the business ahead of them; the attention of Boney and Sam was closely concentrated upon the four men, and Rush Powell was endeavoring to watch both points of interest, while August Angel was scrambling up to a position of better advantage.

Then it was that Boney Priddle whispered the word to Sam, and the transformation scene was sudden and complete.

No longer was there any doubt of the presence of somebody at the edge of the clearing, and the continuous cracking of the magazine-rifle and the repeating-carbine at once told Rush Powell who the somebody was.

He uttered a yell of triumph as he thrust his head out of the hole, and Engel immediately joined him there with shouts of encouragement to their friends.

The friends needed no encouragement, as they had put their whole souls into the work, and were doing it so thoroughly, that the fight was entirely a one-sided affair.

When the terrible repeating-weapons had a fair chance to get their work in, there was no hope for the swambers and their muzzle-loading hunting-rifles.

It must have seemed to the Summers crew as if a regiment had been turned loose upon them, and the surprise and the rapid firing so astonished and bewildered them that they were incapable of any other action than precipitate flight.

The log was dropped instantly as two of its bearers fell under that fire, and a third was knocked over before he could fairly get the use of his legs.

One only escaped—the man nearest to the log house—who ran around the corner of the building, pursued by shot after shot, and disappeared in the woods without once attempting to look back.

The coast was clear enough then, and Powell and Engel found their contemplated escape a much easier matter than they had expected it to be.

Without bothering themselves about opening the door, they emerged from the hole in the roof, and scrambled down the logs to the ground, where they speedily joined their friends.

and rescuers and exchanged joyful congratulations.

"We are out of that scrape much better and easier than we could ever have hoped to get out," said Powell. "How did you two happen to meet and come to our help in such splendid style?"

"It was Salamander's doin'," answered Bouey. "He's the boss of the job. If it hadn't been for him, there's no tellin' whar we'd be now."

"I knew the boy would do to bet on," chimed in Engel. "But we will adjourn all discussion, my friends, until we look into the condition of our recent enemies."

One of those enemies was beyond the reach of any further consideration in this world; another had nearly finished the trip to the other shore, and the third was evidently nearing the last stages of bullet consumption.

Whatever might have been done by Sam's carbine, there could be no doubt that Boney Bridle had put in his work most effectively.

The third wounded man, as it happened, was Jim Summers, the leader of the swamper, and Rush Powell, who was full of the idea that the capture of the party had been one of Morley Plympton's schemes, fastened upon Jim Summers with the intention of persuading the truth out of him while he had breath to tell it.

Summers was in no condition to talk; but the engineer succeeded in getting a few words from his lips.

"There is a chance for your life," said Rush, "and we will take care of you, and do the best we can for you, if you will tell us who put you up to this job. We think we know who it was, but want to be sure. Who was it?"

"Gid Scrooby," answered the swamper, and the remainder of his breath was used in cursing the man who had got him into that fatal scrape.

"That settles it, boys," said Powell. "We know that old Scrooby is Morley Plympton's agent, and of course they are partners in this business. I only wish we could fasten it on one of them."

As there had not been the least chance for the life of the wounded man, Powell was not compelled to make good his promise to care for him, and the question arose as to what should be done with the bodies of the slain.

"We don't need to bury the skunks, or to bother with 'em in any way," observed Boney Priddle. "One of 'em got away, and he'll carry the news to their friends, and we can leave them to tend to the nasty job."

"If they have friends about here," said Rush, "and I suppose they must have, that opens up another question."

"What question's that, colonel?"

"Will not their friends try to hunt us down, and get even with us for this scrape? Would it not be better for us to find their den and clean it out, so that our further stay in this country may be free from that danger?"

"Perhaps we might light on a nest of women," suggested Salamander.

"Sam is right," remarked the professor. "We have no wish to do any unnecessary killing, or to undertake any needless labors. We had better steer clear of the rest of the scoundrels, if there are more of them; try to keep a good watch, and take better care of yourselves hereafter than heretofore."

This was accepted as good advice, and the party returned to the launch, where they prepared and ate the food they all needed, and compared notes concerning their various experiences during the "scrape."

Then they put the Wave in order, and steamed away from the locality of their unpleasant and perilous adventure.

CHAPTER XXI.

PLYMPTON CARRIES THE NEWS.

MORLEY PLYMPTON, turning out of his apartment at Gideon Scrooby's house at a late hour in the morning, after a severe and prolonged wrestle with John Barleycorn the previous night, found some good news awaiting him.

He did not deserve any good news, judging him by his sullen face, his red eyes, and his general appearance, suggestive of a heavy delirium, to say nothing of his morose air and surly manner; but it was there for him, all the same.

"The rain falleth alike upon the just and the unjust," and frequently in this wicked world the unjust gets the lion's share.

The present possessor and expectant disburser of the pleasant intelligence was good old Gideon Scrooby, the canny Scotchman who sat back in the cool and spun spider-webs which were intended and well calculated to catch fat flies.

He was thus occupied, no doubt, as he sat on his veranda that morning, smoking his pipe and gazing at the live-oak grove.

Upon this reverie the appearance of Morley Plympton, although he had been expected for some time, thrust an unpleasant if not repugnant feature that caused Scrooby to pucker his lips and draw his face down in a frown.

"You are very late, Plympton," said he. "I began to think that the whisky had struck in, and that you would never stir out any

more. I had some news, too, that I wanted to tell you."

"Bad news, I suppose, as usual," grumbled the other. "I never get any other sort nowadays. Well, Gid, give me something to wash it down with, and then fire it into me."

Though Scrooby ordered some whisky at once, he was evidently displeased at this style of address.

"You drink as freely as if you owned a distillery," he growled, "when it is very doubtful at this moment whether you really own enough to buy a peck of corn."

"That's the way it looks just now, old man, as I have reason enough to know, and that is what has sent me down into the low grounds of sorrow. Since Judge Wilshire has been serving his infernal notices, and everybody has got wind of the trouble, I can't collect a cent of money, and my credit has gone clear over the dam."

"What else can you expect when you go on in this fashion, throwing yourself away and neglecting your business?"

"Give me the bottle, Gid, and don't be so pinch-fingered. Ah! that went to the right place, and I will have to send another after it to keep it from being lonesome. Why do you twit me with neglecting my business, Gid? I was ready to attend to the only business that amounts to anything at present; but you took it out of my hands."

"And it was a good thing for you that I did."

"So you say; but that remains to be proved. Go on with your bad news."

"It happens to be good news."

"Have the skies fallen and brought us a load of larks? Go on with your good news, then. I can even stand that with this fortifier at my elbow."

"I have just said, Morley, that it was a good thing for you that I took that business into my hands, and the proof of the pudding is in the eating. I have heard from my scheme, and it has worked to the satisfaction of all concerned—that is, to the satisfaction of you and me."

"It is too good to be true," answered Plympton as he proceeded to solace himself again.

"It is true enough to be good, anyhow. This morning I had a call from a down-country man."

"What sort of a customer was that?"

"A swamper—a 'gator man—from the headwaters of the Keewannee, who had strayed into the settlements and had an errand to me. He had met Jim Summers, the man I hired to attend to that business, and a message had been sent by him to me."

"Shoot it out, then. Give me a bite of the pudding."

"He had run across Jim Summers as he was starting out, and Summers asked him to tell Gid Scrooby that he'd got 'em. The man said that he brought the message as he got it, not knowing what it meant, and I told him that it referred to a lot of 'gator skins that Jim had promised to get for me."

"I suppose that is satisfactory; but it seems to me to be somewhat indefinite," objected Plympton.

"It was definite enough to cause me to give the man a five-dollar bill, which made his eyes open as if he had come into a fortune. Summers was smarter than I had expected him to be. How could he put the thing any plainer without giving the scheme away? When he said that he'd got 'em, that was meant to let me know that he had taken in and hornswoggled that surveying party, of course including the boy, who may be considered as the objective point of the campaign."

"That high-headed cuss of a Powell, too, I hope. I would be willing to miss him. Well, Gid, that is great and glorious news; and I suppose it is to be depended on, if your man Summers hasn't sent you a lie."

"Why should he? He has everything to gain by telling the truth and doing just what I engaged him to do. I believe you may set it down as a sure thing, Morley, that the boy is out of your way, and that the rest of the outfit will never see a settlement again."

This was such good news to Morley Plympton that he felt himself justified in celebrating it in the way that best pleased him, and when his nerve was sufficiently strong and his blood was sufficiently fired, he mounted his horse for the long ride to Colonel Tremper's place, carrying on the journey a goodly quantity of the celebrating fluid.

His news was too good to keep, and he was determined to lose no time in triumphing over Eva Tremper and letting the colonel know where he stood.

He missed his chance to break Eva's heart immediately with this intelligence, as she was not in the house when he arrived, and he was received by Colonel Tremper.

A great surprise awaited him in the condition of the old gentleman, who was actually and indubitably sober.

His face was unusually pale, and his general appearance was "shaky," as if he might have lately recovered from a severe illness; but his

eyes were clear, and he had regained his soldierly bearing, and he was a faithful image, though a shadow, of the Colonel Tremper who had faced death on the bloodiest of battlefields.

"What's the matter, old man?" roughly demanded Morley Plympton. "You look as if you'd been pulled through a knothole. Have you had a spell of sickness? Has the old enemy got you down at last?"

"Nothing is the matter with me, young man," coldly answered Colonel Tremper. "I am quite well, no thanks to you and have not been sick."

"Something's the matter with you, I'll swear. I never saw you look so white around the gills before."

"The only thing that annoys me just now, sir, is your presence, and I wish to know why you have come here."

"Look here, old man, it won't do to take on that high and mighty tone with me. The time for that sort of thing has gone by. That's a pretty sort of way to talk to your creditor, the man who can sell you out and turn you adrift in the swamps. Business has brought me here, and I want to know when you are going to pay me the money you owe me on that mortgage."

"I have been informed on good legal authority, Mr. Plympton, that I do not owe you anything, and that I must not pay you any money."

"That was right into your hand, I suppose, and you thought you would get clear of paying anything to anybody. That game worked very well for a while; but it is played out now, as you and all the others concerned will find out to your cost. The little difficulty has been settled, and settled in my favor."

The old gentleman trembled a little, as his nerves were shaken by the confident tone of his rude visitor; but he stood his ground nobly.

"How has it been settled?" he inquired.

"By the removal of one of the parties. The hand of Providence, as I suppose the parsons would call it, has been getting its work in, and the young fraud who has been put forward by a lot of blackmailers to try to take my property from me has sailed away to the golden shore. Now that their figurehead is gone, the scheme of the blackmailers will collapse like a burst bladder."

This was terrible news for Colonel Tremper, and he sunk into a chair, his pale face changing to an ashy hue as he realized the full consequences of the information that had been given him.

"Do you mean to tell me that young Startle is dead?" he feebly inquired.

"Very dead, my ancient warrior. As dead as a door nail or Julius Caesar or any of the traditional dead things we hear of. If I supposed him to be a relative of mine, I would put on mourning; but I knew him to be a fraud, you see."

"When and where and how did it happen?"

"I am sorry to say that I can't go into details just yet, and if I could they might worry your sympathetic soul. You know that he and the scamps who took charge of him started on an expedition to the wilderness at the headquarters of the Keewannee. Well, they got there, and news has lately come in that gives the upshot of the expedition—that is to say, it shot up."

"But how? What happened to them?"

"Just what has happened to other fools who have ventured in there without sense enough to take care of themselves. Some of the wild swampers, who saw that they had a soft thing in getting hold of the valuable property that had been intrusted to those scoundrels, jumped on them and wiped them out."

"Were they all killed?"

"Of course they were. Do you suppose the swampers would let one of them slip off? That's not their style. I haven't got the full particulars, and may never get them; but the account is clear enough to make it certain that a party of surveyors was wiped out, and there was no other party in there."

Colonel Tremper seemed to be on the point of breaking down.

This cruel piece of news, overthrowing the hopes and plans he had lately formed, and bringing such a terrible blow to his daughter was almost too much for him to endure in his enfeebled condition.

Morley Plympton saw how he was affected, and applied the lash remorselessly.

"So you see, old man, that game is played out. The young fraud won't turn up to bother me any more, and the scoundrel that your daughter was sweet on is sleeping his last sleep, and now there is nothing more between you and me in the way of our business. You will pay the money to me, if it is ever paid to anybody, and you will have to come to my terms, which you know well enough, or I shall clean out the concern, and I don't mean to have any fool business about it, either. What do you say to that, now? Will you give in?"

"Never!" firmly answered Colonel Tremper, as he roused himself up.

"Come now, old man, don't be too hasty and hot-headed. I've got the whip hand here, and I mean to use it. Better take a drink and think the matter over."

The old gentleman rose to his feet, and though he was obliged to steady himself by his chair, his

form was as erect and his air as manly and courageous as ever in his best days.

Morley Plympton fairly quailed before the indignant gaze of the infirm old soldier.

"Never!" he shrilly replied. "Liquor and I are strangers now, and such we shall ever be, whether I die to-morrow or live for many years. Not a drop of the accursed stuff shall ever pass my lips again. I leave that to you, and am glad to see that the foul fiend has got a good grip on you. It is fitting poison for such a snake as you are, and may it soon do its work! I have no need to think the matter over. I have already decided it, and the decision is irrevocable. Come what may, I would rather give my daughter to the alligators than to such a wretch as you. Now, you scoundrel, do your worst! Whether you have been lying to me or speaking the truth by chance, you can hurt me no more."

Plympton was bewildered by this outburst at its beginning, but soon recovered himself, and astonishment gave way to rage.

He started up, his face red with fury, just as Eva Tremper glided quietly into the room.

She had an open letter in her hand, and there had evidently been tears in her eyes, but the sunshine of her smiles had chased the clouds away.

At the sight of Morley Plympton she hastily folded the letter, and stepped forward firmly and proudly.

"What does this mean, father?" she demanded. "What does this man want here, and what has he been saying to you?"

"This man," answered Plympton, with a sneer, "was merely demanding his due, and he has brought some news that may concern you, though I doubt if you will be very glad to hear it."

Eva gave her father a glance of inquiry.

"He has brought bad news, my dear," said the old gentleman—"the very worst news. I had hoped that I would not see you until after he had gone away, so that I might break it to you gently; but I perceive that there is no stopping him from telling it, and you must try to bear it, dear child."

"Is it about Rush Powell?" she inquired, as calmly as if the matter did not concern her in the least.

"Yes, dear—about him and young Startle. This man tells me that they are dead."

"The fatal word seemed to produce no impression upon Eva, who merely opened her eyes a little wider and grasped the letter in her hand a little more tightly.

"This is news, indeed," she observed, "and I must say that it surprises me. Is it true, Mr. Plympton?"

"Of course it is. I got it from a man who had lately come from that region, and he told me that the party had all been killed by swamper. It came as straight as a line."

"No doubt of that. And you were the first to get the news, if not the only one. So it was you, then, who employed those swamper to attack the party and kill them. I had supposed it was Mr. Scrooby."

This calm and measured speech astonished both Morley Plympton and Colonel Tremper, but not in the same manner.

What could the young lady mean?

"What's that?" sputtered Plympton, as he turned very red in the face. "What do you mean by saying that I or Scrooby employed the swamper to kill them?"

"You are mistaken, Mr. Plympton. I had supposed Mr. Scrooby to be the scoundrel, but said that it must have been you. However, that matters little, as you are both in the same boat. Are you sure that Mr. Powell is dead?"

"What are you driving at? I don't understand you. Of course he is dead."

"There must be a mistake somewhere. He says that he is not dead, and I never knew him to tell an untruth."

"Says he is not dead? What do you mean?"

"He surely ought to know whether he is alive or dead, and it is reasonable for me to suppose that he would not have written to me if he had been dead."

"Written to you?"

"I have a letter from him here which was written after the affair with the swamper of which you have spoken. If Mr. Powell is to be believed, you are mistaken in saying that his party was killed by those scoundrels, as he tells me that they came off safely, after killing three of the swamper."

"Let me see that letter," fiercely ordered Plympton.

"Oh, no, Mr. Plympton. You must take my word for that. It is enough that I believe what I have said, and you must perceive that I do believe it. Mr. Powell tells me that Gideon Scrooby was responsible for the attack; but you are welcome to that honor if you wish it."

"There's something wrong about this," growled Plympton. "Somebody has been most infernally fooled. I'll pull you down off your high horse yet, Miss Tremper—see if I don't!"

He snatched his hat, hurried out of the house, mounted his horse, and rode away at a gallop, venting his ill-humor upon the unfortunate animal he rode.

As soon as he was clear of the room Eva Tremper fell into her father's arms and burst into tears; but the tears she shed were tears of joy.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BLACK BAND'S WORK.

EVA TREMPER had occasion before long to shed more tears of joy, and to accompany them with many smiles.

The surveying party finished their mission up the Keewawnee successfully and without any further disaster or noteworthy incident, and returned to the settlements.

August Engel and Boney Priddle navigated the Wave on Coahoula, to deliver her to Judge Wilshire, and prepare a report of the expedition, while Rush Powell and Salamander crossed the country to Colonel Tremper's, to enjoy a brief vacation which they had well earned, and for which at least one of them eagerly longed.

Salamander Sam was almost as warmly welcomed at the Tremper mansion as Rush Powell was, not only because he was believed to be the heir of the Plympton property, but because Powell's letter had told of his courage and devotion in effecting the rescue of his friends, and because he had many traits which endeared him to those whose friendship was worth having.

Rush was greatly surprised as well as gratified at the change which was manifest in Colonel Tremper, and drew from it the most favorable auguries for the future of Eva and her father.

The old gentleman had entirely recovered his health, though he had not regained his former strength, and was in all respects a different and a vastly better man than the Colonel Tremper whom Powell had left there when he went up the Keewawnee.

He had gained new energy and ambition, and the results of his recent endeavors were already visible in the improved condition of the house, the grounds, and the plantation generally.

He was obliged to confess that he did not see his way clear to get rid of the load of debt that had been fastened upon him while he was astray from his better nature; but he meant to do his best with the means in his hands, and, if Sam Startle should be adjudged the heir of the Plympton estates, he might hope to have time which would enable him gradually to pay off his indebtedness.

In any event he would have no further compromise or parley with Morley Plympton.

This being his temper and disposition, he had become a great comfort to his daughter, in whose society and that of her lover he took great pleasure.

Morley Plympton had not again made his appearance at Colonel Tremper's place, and the people there had heard nothing from him except incidentally, their information being that his time was mostly passed at Gideon Scrooby's and devoted to the consumption of liquor.

Whether it had been Plympton or Scrooby who set the swamper on the surveying party, there could be no doubt that it was one of them, and, as Eva Tremper had said, they were both in the same boat; but it was also certain that the mere word of a dead man could not be used as evidence against either of them, and Rush Powell could only express the hope that he might find a chance to get even with them.

In the mean time, he said, the one thing needful was to keep Sam Startle carefully out of their clutches.

Salamander Sam, however, was the style of young fellow that was difficult to keep within metes and bounds—not from any natural wariness of character, or from an indisposition to listen to advice or follow it, but because he was fond of adventure, and more especially because his recent adventures had given him such a contempt for danger that he almost believed himself to bear a charmed life.

Though his life at Colonel Tremper's pleased him beyond measure, he had become passionately fond of hunting, and, since he had got his repeating-carbine, he was unwilling to miss any chance of indulging in his favorite pastime.

In view of these facts Rush Powell decided that he must soon bring his vocation to a close, take Sam to Coahoula, represent the case to Judge Wilshire, get a personal guardian appointed for the lad, and send him where he would be sure to be out of the way of Morley Plympton until his rights could be settled.

But Rush Powell's vocation was very pleasant to him under the circumstances, and time flew faster than he thought, and Sam Startle enjoyed himself pretty much as pleased himself.

Care was taken, however, that Sam should not be alone on his hunting excursions, and, when his friend Powell was not able to go with him, he was always accompanied by Ben, a young negro man on the place, who was "no slouch" of a hunter, and was accounted a bright and active fellow.

One evening just after sunset Rush Powell and Eva Tremper were seated most comfortably near together on the veranda, and the young lady's father, having finished his daily round of duties, had just joined them.

They were speaking of Salamander, who had

gone off with Ben and had not yet returned; though he should have been home by that hour.

It was not an unusual thing for him to be absent until dark, and there was no special cause for apprehension; but Powell was particularly uneasy on this occasion, and his uneasiness was communicated to the others.

"I can't stand this any longer," said Rush, "and I don't mean to. I shall have to bring this more than pleasant visit to a close; but I will surely start for Coahoula to-morrow, and will take Sam with me, and will make arrangements for keeping him well out of the way of Morley Plympton hereafter."

"You are right, Mr. Powell," said Colonel Tremper. "I must say that I have observed the lad's proceedings with much uneasiness, and I am fully of the opinion that he ought to be removed to a place of safety. His life and liberty are of too much importance to himself and others to be subjected to any needless risks."

"I hope there is no occasion for any alarm just now," observed Eva. "Indeed, I am sure there is not, as I see them coming home. No—it is only Ben; Salamander is not with him."

"Merciful heavens!" exclaimed Rush. "Has anything happened to the boy?"

There could be no doubt that something had happened to him.

Ben was hurrying toward the house, as if he had something of importance to communicate, and his dark face so plainly told a tale of disaster, that the three persons on the veranda hurried down to meet him.

"I couldn't help it," moaned the young negro man, as he panted for breath and expressed in sobs the emotion wrung from him by the story he had to tell.

"I couldn't help it, Mars'r Curnel an' Miss Eva. I done did all I could, but I couldn't help it."

"What is it, you black rascal?" fiercely demanded Colonel Tremper. "Hold up your head this instant, and tell me plainly and quickly just what has happened."

Thus ordered, and under the eye of his master, Ben speedily recovered his wits, and related a tale that nearly paralyzed his hearers with horror and a sense of utter helplessness.

The misfortune had come to him and "young Mars'r Sam" several hours ago, and at a considerable distance from home.

They had not stopped to eat their luncheon at noon, Sam being then intent upon following the trail of a deer which he had found; but the trail came to nothing, and it must have been nearly two hours after noon when they halted to eat a bite.

It was a wild spot where they halted—a little glade far from any road or path, surrounded by thickets of vines and bushes.

As they were seated at their luncheon four negro men stole out of the thicket and rushed upon them, seizing and overpowering them before they knew what was the matter.

Two of them bound Salamander and led him away in one direction, carrying the arms of the two hunters, while the others led Ben in the opposite direction, back over the trail he had made in coming to the glade.

He was led in that direction at a pretty rapid rate for several miles, until he reached a forest road, where he was turned loose.

Up to that point his captors had maintained an obstinate silence, refusing to make the least reply to his many questions and expostulations; but one of them spoke when Ben was set free.

"We don't want to hurt you, nigger," said he, "and don't want nuffin' to do wid you, nohow. Go right along, now, and run away home, and you'd better not so much as look back arter you start."

As there was clearly nothing else that he could do, Ben obeyed this order, and made his best possible speed back to Colonel Tremper's.

"Who can they have been? What did they look like?" anxiously inquired Powell.

"Oh, I knows dat well enough," promptly answered Ben. "I nebter see any ob 'em befo', but I knows dar style. Dey's swamp niggers, Mars'r Rush, de wuss kind o' swamp niggers. Dar's no tellin' whar dey come from or whar dey go to, and no doin' nuffin' wid 'em, nohow."

Colonel Tremper explained to Rush—though the young man probably knew as much about the matter as he did—that the "swamp niggers" mentioned by Ben were wild or outlawed tribes or collections of "American citizens of African descent," who were not at all interested in the great fact of emancipation, and knew nothing of the privileges or duties of citizenship.

Slaves had escaped, many years ago, to inaccessible localities in the swamps and glades, where they and their descendants had since lived and flourished after a wild and barbarous fashion.

Others had joined them from time to time, and none were ever known to return to the haunts and ways of civilization.

They were free and independent, getting their food easily and caring little for clothes, and had gone so far backward to barbarism that little more than the language remained to them

of what they had learned from their former masters.

It must be admitted, however, that they were little if any worse, except for the heathenish rites they practiced, than the white swamper, of whom Mr. Powell could form his own opinion.

This state of affairs presented a problem that seemed to be unsolvable, and Rush Powell was compelled to confess that this was by all odds the worst mischance that had befallen Salamander.

When the attacks were made by the Hyleys and the other white swamper, Sam had happened to be absent from the camp on each occasion, and circumstances had so shaped themselves that he was not only unharmed, but was able to assist materially in effecting the rescue of his comrades.

This time the blow had been aimed at him alone, and he had been struck in such a manner that it seemed to be impossible for his friends to afford him any aid, as his captors, even if their hiding-place could be discovered, were doubtless too strong to submit to anything but a large and well appointed force.

There was reason to fear, also, that if this was the work of Morley Plympton, his disappointment at previous failures would cause him to bring this attempt to a sure and sudden end by the death of his young relative.

Rush Powell was in despair.

He could think of but one thing to do, and that would require so much time that it would appear to be practically useless, and yet he must leave no effort untried.

He declared that he would set out immediately for Coahoula and get his friends Engel and Priddle, with such other help as could be picked up there, and bring them on to Colonel Tremper's as speedily as possible.

Then he would have Ben guide them to the spot where Salamander had been captured, and at that point they would pick up the trail and follow it to the hiding-place of the "swamp niggers."

If it should prove to be true that they had made an end of Sam, he would wreak such vengeance upon them as should exterminate or scatter the clan.

This plan was approved by Colonel Tremper and Eva, as there was nothing else that they could suggest, and the colonel was about to order a horse for his young friend, when there was an interruption that offered them another hope.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE OBI WOMAN.

"Jess you hol' on, Mars'r Rush, an' gib yer ol' Aunt Cely a chance at dis yer' t'ing."

It was Aunt Celia herself who spoke, and she had been listening in the open doorway to all that was said.

She was a gray and somewhat skinny negress, pretty well on in years, who was an old servant of the Tremper family, having come down to them from the days of slavery, and having never shown any desire to desert them or to change her situation.

Indeed, as far as Aunt Celia was concerned, the emancipation proclamation might as well have not been issued, as it had not changed her condition in the least, except that she knew that she was legally her own mistress and could not be sold.

She was the mother of Ben, in whose charge Salamander Sam was at the time of his misfortune, and had been the nurse and "mammy" of Eva Tremper, whose fortunes would be seriously affected by the loss of the lad.

It may be added that no person knew better than Aunt Celia what woes might result from the death of Sam Startle, as the Tremper family had no secrets from her.

This was not by any means the extent of her knowledge, as she was reported to be very wise in certain mysterious and occult matters that were peculiar to her race.

On this account Aunt Celia was both respected and feared by the entire colored population of that region, who flocked to her for advice, obeyed implicitly her orders, and believed her to possess supernatural powers in the composition of charms and potions and powders, which were supposed never to fail in helping or harming as she desired them to do.

As soon as Aunt Celia spoke, the faces of Colonel Tremper and his daughter lighted up, and they wondered why they had not at once thought of applying to her.

It was certain that nowhere else could they hope to obtain so much information concerning "swamp niggers" and such useful advice as Celia could give them if she should be willing, and why should she not be willing?

She was not only willing, but came forward with alacrity and made a personal affair of the matter.

"Don't you go off yonder, Mars'r Rush," said the old woman. "T'wouldn't do a mite o' good—not ef you was to fetch on all Abe Linkum's army."

"But something must be done," protested Powell, "and that is the only thing I can think of."

"Tain't no good, I tell yer. Jess leab it to ol' Aunt Cely, and she'll tend to it."

"What can you do, mammy?" inquired Eva.

"Eberything dat kin be done—jess dat and no mo'. Why, bless yer soul, chile, I knows all 'bout dem swamp niggers, an' dey knows me. Dey's got to stan' aroun' when Cely gits her wool up, jess min' w'ot I tells yer. I'se a Obi woman, I is, one ob de way-uppers, and dis is my business, too, as my Ben was in de scrape, though it warn't no fault o' his'n."

"But what will you do?" again demanded Eva.

"Go right out dar inter de swamp an' tell dem niggers dat ef dey hurt a ha'r ob Mars'r Sam's head, dey'll wish dey'd nebber been bornded, an' dey knows dey's got to min' me, too."

"Can you find them, mammy?"

"Find 'em? Me? Jess as easy as you kin find yer bed, honey, when you wants to sleep. It don't make no diff'ence wedder it's day or night, and dar ain't no boss kin git dar quicker'n ol' Cely, needer."

"I am afraid that they have already killed the poor boy," suggested Powell.

Aunt Celia confidently declared that he need feel no apprehensions on that score.

"Dey nebber kills nuffin' befo' de next day," she affirmed. "De Obi men won't let 'em. I'll git dar in time to stop de cuttin' up."

"Will you bring Sam back with you?" inquired Eva.

"Wal, now, honey, dat's anodder t'ing. I'll see dat dey don't kill him; but mo'n dat I can't say jess yet. His life's de fu'st pint, and I hain't got no time to spar' needer."

Rush Powell begged to be allowed to accompany her; but the old woman refused his request very positively and almost with disdain.

"You wouldn't do a mite o' good, Mars'r Rush, but would on'y be in my way, and de bigger and fightin'er you was, de mo' harm you'd do. Lemme 'lone, now, and you wite folk stay right yer' until I git ready."

Aunt Celia's getting ready had nothing to do with a change of clothes or any of the usual preparations; but she was entirely occupied with molding in moist clay a small and very rude representation of the human form—so rude, indeed, that the artist was obliged to explain what it was meant for before it could be recognized.

This image she brought to the veranda, and gave it into the charge of Eva, with specific instructions as to what should be done with it.

"You'll have to help me wite dis, honey, 'case I must leave it yer' to be tended to wile I'm gone to de swamps."

"What is it, mammy?"

"Dat dar figger, Miss Eva, is ole Eph, de head man ob dem swamp niggers. I reckon he'll hab to suffah some befo' I git him toned down so's to min' me, and dat's w'ot you must 'end to, 'case it would break de cha'm to hab anybody else do it."

"Tell me what to do, mammy, and you may be sure that I will attend to it."

"Stay up till midnight, honey, and jess at de midnight minnit you want souse a pin inter his a'm right yer', up to de head, and leab it dar. Den jess at noon to-morrer you want souse anodder pin inter his lef' leg, right yer', de same way, and don't furgit de time. Now I'm gwine ter de swamps."

Serious as the trouble was, Rush Powell could hardly refrain, after the old woman had left them, from laughing at her uncouth image and her queer instructions.

"Do you believe in her witchcraft, Eva?" he asked. "Are you really going to sit up to-night and stick a pin into that lump of mud?"

"I do not believe in witchcraft of any kind," answered Eva, "and yet I have known so many strange things to come to pass through Aunt Celia's proceedings, that I might almost be tempted to believe in her witchcraft. But I am sure that she has much power among those wild people, and that she means to use it to help poor Salamander Sam and the rest of us. For that reason I shall follow her directions implicitly, and at the same time my prayers will go with her."

"No doubt you are right, as you always are. You will sit up until midnight, and I shall have the pleasure of sitting up with you and assisting in the mysterious rite."

Eva placed the mud image where she was sure that it would be entirely safe, and the party on the veranda went in to a late supper, though their trouble had robbed them of their appetites.

Aunt Celia, though she declared that she wanted no company, was not to be permitted to go alone.

Just as she was about to pass out of the grounds she was met by an elderly negro man, whose presence there at that time was quite distasteful to her.

This individual was Julius Backbone, who had been for some time employed on the Tremper plantation, and who was almost as notorious in his way as Celia was in hers, being generally known as Pa'son Backbone, and famous as an exhorter and leader at the colored camp-meetings and revivals.

He not only respected Aunt Celia quite as much as the rest of the colored population re-

spected her, but was more than suspected of entertaining matrimonial aspirations of which she was the object.

"H. I' on, Sistah Celia," said Parson Julius, as she was briskly stepping off. "I'se gwine wid yer."

"Whar's you gwine ter, Julius?" she sharply demanded.

"To de swamps, to see dem swamp niggers."

"How'd yer know I was gwine ter de swamps?"

"Ben tol' me."

"Ben's got too much lip. I on'y wish he'd got as much sense as he's got lip. W'ot yer want see dem swamp niggers fur?"

"'Ca'se you's gwine, honey, and 'ca'se—dey's got souls to be saved."

Celia was walking on at a good pace, though not so rapidly as she had started.

"I dunno 'bout dat," she replied. "Ef dem niggers ebber had any souls, I reckon de debbil's got ech a big mo'gage onto 'em dat 'tain't no use fur anybody to try to git unner him. Mought as well say dat 'gators has got souls."

"You don't order talk like dat, Sistah Celia. Tain't Chrisshun."

"Don't keer wedder it's Chrisshun or not. I ain't bodderin' 'bout no Chrisshuns now. I'se gwine dar on business, I is, and I don't want no sawt o' comp'ny, nohow."

"I'se gwine wid you, Sistah Celia, sart'in shu'."

"Bettah not, Bruddah Julius. Min' w'ot I tells yer—bettah not. I'm gwine out dis night on business dat hain't got nuffin' to do wid Chrisshuns, and you couldn't begin ter keep up wid me, nohow."

"I'se gwine ter try, sistah."

"Bettah not, I say. Ef you should git out dar oncet among dem swamp niggers, I reckon you wouldn't keer much mo' 'bout dar souls w'en dey was b'ilin' you fur Voodoo soup."

Parson Julius Backbone rolled up the yellows of his eyes, but was otherwise no more affected by the prospect of being boiled than one of the ancient martyrs might have been.

Aunt Celia moved away swiftly, and he followed her to the best of his ability; but it was soon evident that his ability was not equal to his will.

The speed with which that gaunt and withered old woman got over the ground was little short of miraculous, and Parson Julius, toiling on after her, found himself covered with perspiration and panting for breath, while she sailed on like a full-rigged vessel with a fair wind.

When she had got some distance ahead of him, and he had nearly lost sight of her in the darkness, but while her eyes were good enough to perceive that he was still zealously striving to keep up with her, she apparently relented and walked a little more slowly until he overtook her.

"I do declar' Sistah Celia," panted Parson Julius, as he mopped the perspiration from his face, "you jess beats all de wo'ld fur goin'. Ise nigh busted my wind tryin' to keep up."

"I tol' you fa'r an' squar', Bruddah Julius," answered Celia, "dat I didn't want you fur to go 'long wid me, and dat you'd bettah not do it. I'se gwine on business, and 'tain't de Lawd's business, needer, and de Lawd and I don't bitch hosses dis night nohow. So you's jess bettah turn right 'roun' and try ter fin' yer way back home."

"Couldn't do it, Sistah Celia, do my bestest. It's as dark as de sins ob Egypt, and I don't know de way. Ise gwineter foller you, honey, wile dar's a button on Gabe's coat."

"Foller, den, Bruddah Backbone. De 'gators an' moccasins is waitin' fur you."

By this time, Celia and her follower were far from Colonel Tremper's mansion, far in the forest, with no road or path or trail to show the way, and on the point of entering a region abounding in swamps and sloughs and hummocks, where the deadly moccasin snake was ready to resent intrusion upon his solitudes, and where a false step might land the unwary traveler in the open jaws of a waiting alligator.

For all this Aunt Celia cared nothing, or seemed to care nothing.

She stepped forward firmly, seeming to glide, rather than to walk, when she came to the worst places, and passing onward so easily and so rapidly that Parson Julius perceived at once that the utmost of his exertions would not enable him to keep up with her.

It seemed that the souls of the "swamp niggers" would utterly fail of salvation through his efforts, as all his powers of body and mind were concentrated upon the wish to save his own life.

He was doing his best to pass over a narrow space with a swamp on each side, where a fallen cypress tree, to which swamp debris and growth had naturally come, formed an uncertain bridge, when his foot slipped, and down he went.

The yell that he gave as he dropped might have waked all the snakes and alligators within the range of half a mile.

It was surely heard by Aunt Celia, who came to his rescue at a swifter pace than she had even yet shown, and fished him out of the mud with an imprecation which he, if he had been in a condition to comprehend that sort of thing, would have recognized as utterly unchristian.

Plastered with mud, dripping wet, and half-paralyzed by fear, he fell on his knees and entreated her not to leave him.

"Go 'long wid yer!" she angrily replied. "I hain't got no time to fool wid no sech."

"Whar'll I go to, Sistah Cely?"

"Go home, you ole fool."

"I can't go home—couldn't nebber fin' de way."

"Stay whar you be, den."

"Dar's 'gators an' snakes an' spooks an' eberyting all 'bout yer."

"Bettah climb a tree, den."

She pointed to a swamp oak with a leaning trunk, which stretched a friendly branch over the narrow footway, and he scrambled up into the crotch, assisted by a vigorous boost from Celia.

The next instant she sped away so swiftly that she seemed to vanish like a ghost, leaving Parson Backbone to his fears and his prayers as he wished for the morning that seemed to him as if it would never come, though it was really near at hand.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"PLENTY VODOO SOUP."

AUNT CELIA'S son Ben had told the story of the capture about as it happened, a little allowance being made for his natural proclivity to exaggeration.

He and Sam Startle had been seated at their luncheon, their thoughts far from any idea of danger, when they were suddenly pounced upon without the least warning and without the slightest chance to resist.

Their captors answered to Ben's description, being four stalwart negroes; but there was one point about them that did not appear in Ben's description, though Salamander Sam noticed it at once.

Those four negroes could scarcely be said to be clothed, the rags and shreds of cloth and skin that hung about them bearing scarcely any resemblance to civilized garments.

Another point was their wild and savage look and manner, combined with the barbarous jargon they used in talking to each other.

In these points they did not compare unfavorably with the white swampers, except that the latter, coming occasionally in contact with civilization, were a little less ragged, and perhaps a little more human.

The likeness was close enough, however, to enable Sam to form a pretty clear idea of their quality, and to guess at the kind of treatment he might expect at their hands.

His forebodings were speedily changed to convictions by the manner of his separation from his hunting companion.

Ben was forcibly led away by two of the negroes, in spite of his struggles and entreaties, and the others tied Sam's hands behind his back, and marched him away in the opposite direction, after depriving him of his arms and ammunition.

Decidedly this was the worst misfortune that had yet befallen him, and his prospects were dark indeed.

If the negroes meant to do him bodily harm, or even deadly harm, there was nothing to prevent them from working their will upon him, nor could he imagine any chance by which he might free himself from their clutches.

Separated from Ben, far from any friends, in a wild and trackless region, and destitute of weapons, as well as bound and guarded, he could hardly be in a more helpless condition.

There was a little consolation in the fact that they did not make an end of him then and there.

If they were going to kill him, why should they take the trouble to bind him and carry him away?

Was it possible that murder was not their object?

At all events, while there was life there was hope, and Salamander sturdily resolved that he would make the best of it and suffer no chance to slip by which he might save his life or regain his liberty.

He spoke to his captors boldly and without any tears and entreaties, demanding to be told why they had committed that outrage upon him, but they did not pay the slightest attention to his talk, and only spoke when it was necessary to urge him forward, which they did, roughly enough.

When he threatened them with the vengeance of his friends, they merely grinned and showed their white teeth, as if they felt sure that they were entirely safe from any outside interference.

Perceiving that there was nothing to be gained by threatening or cajoling his guards, Sam turned his attention to the route they were taking, as the only point left to which his thoughts might be profitably directed.

He was determined to "take it in" as thoroughly as possible, using his eyes to the best advantage, and noting carefully every landmark and change of ground or direction, so that if he should happen to escape, he might at least hope to be able to find his way out.

But he was forced to confess that the route would probably prove to be too much for his memory.

Though it was nearly a straight line for a considerable distance from the point of his capture, there was a provoking sameness about it, no point or position of the forest specially impressing itself upon him, and the trees being so tall and thick that he was unable to get a good idea of the direction of the sun.

When they got into the region of the swamps, the journey became far more devious and intricate, and he was compelled to abandon in despair the effort to carry the route in his head.

The negroes knew the way well enough—there could be no question of that, as they never paused an instant to deliberate or consider their course, stepping forward as promptly and confidently as if they were on familiar ground—but they turned and twisted so continually and with such apparent recklessness, that all the lad's ideas of latitude and longitude were utterly obliterated.

It was absolutely necessary that they should do so, as the swampy ways offered an uncertain footing at the best, and the only feasible route would often wind in and out in the most bewildering manner.

Salamander's mind was impressed by the silence and strangeness of his dark and wild conductors, quite as much as by the somber cypress forest, the branches thickly hung with long streamers of moss, the unsightly clumps of "knees" jutting up everywhere, and the many reptiles of the swamp that were too bold or too lazy to regard the presence of human beings.

The negroes seemed to consider the reptiles pretty much as they were regarded by them, slinging the sluggish and deadly moccasins with their bare feet from the path into the water, and administering an occasional punch on the nose to an alligator that refused to get out of the way or was otherwise disposed to be too familiar.

All this was fearful as well as depressing to Sam; but he gritted his teeth and kept a stiff upper lip while he wondered at the coolness and confidence of his conductors, until they reached a place where further progress seemed to be impossible.

Darkness had then set in, and they found themselves at the edge of what looked like a lake, and perhaps it deserved to be called a lake, though it was a very shallow one, being merely an extension of the swamp, with occasional hummocks sticking up above the dark water.

In the middle of this lake, and at a distance of some hundred yards from the swampy shore, was an evident island, where the tall trees, not close together, spoke plainly of dry ground.

It seemed to be a pleasant enough place; but how was it to be got at?

This question was clearly no puzzle to the negroes, who knew just where they were and just what they were going to do.

Seizing upon Salamander Sam without any ceremony, and tying his feet as tight as his hands had been tied, one of them swung the lad upon his back and started into the water, while the other followed with the captured guns.

Sam did not know, as he was in a position that allowed him only to stare up at the sky, how the trip to the island was made, but judged that his bearer managed to keep out of the water, as he failed to hear any splashing, and an occasional jump spoke of passing from hummock to hummock, or from one sunken log to another.

When they had reached the firm ground, the negro did not set down his burden, but carried it on to the center of the island, where he dropped it suddenly and heavily, the fall shaking Sam up severely and nearly knocking the breath out of his body.

When he recovered himself sufficiently to sit up and look about him, the scene astonished and bewildered him.

He was in the center of a small clearing surrounded by tall trees, close to the edges of which were several low and rude huts or hovels, giving the place an appearance somewhat similar to that of a Hottentot Kraal.

Near him was a fire, over which hung a large kettle, somewhat like a sugar kettle, from a pole that rested on two crotched stakes driven in the ground, and around the fire and his form were dancing a motley collection of twenty or more negro men and women, while some naked children skirmished about the edges of the irregular circle.

The men and women did not lack much of being as naked as the children, and their dance was accompanied by wild cries, indecent gestures, and at times a swaying and bending of their bodies as if they were about to fall to the ground together.

It was a scene that fitted the heart of Africa, rather than the interior of a State that was believed to be civilized.

This dance lasted a long time, as it seemed to intoxicate the participants, and the more they had of it the more they wanted, though to Sam Startle it was simply disgusting and tiresome.

Exhaustion brought it to an end at last, and most of the dancers squatted on the ground, while one of Sam's captors made a speech in a sort of lingo of which the lad could only under-

stand a part, talking very volubly, and pointing frequently at Sam, who was evidently the subject of the harangue.

This speech was mainly directed to a fat and ugly old negro who seemed to be the head of the gang, and at its close he made a speech in reply, this sentence of which Sam easily understood, as it was frequently repeated:

"Plenty Voodoo soup now."

Whenever these words were uttered they were received with savage cries and yells of exultation.

After a while the lad was glad to perceive that they did not intend to starve him, as one of the men cast off the lashings of his feet and hands, and one of the women brought him a large quantity of food in a wooden bowl.

It was some kind of a stew; but Salamander Sam could not even guess of what meat and vegetables it was composed, as the materials were so disguised by the herbs with which they were cooked.

The stew was very savory, however, and he ate of it heartily, as there was nothing the matter with his appetite after his long tramp and fast.

The woman was evidently pleased to see him eat, and insisted on stuffing him until the lad was seized by a new fear.

Was it their intention to fatten him for the purpose of eating him?

Though of slim build, he was large for his age, and he had lived so well at Colonel Tremper's that he was in excellent physical condition.

"Plenty Voodoo soup now," were the fatal words that kept ringing in his ears, and the entire proceedings were so suggestive of a cannibal feast that he mentally resolved that, if he should be destined to pass into the stomachs of those nasty beasts, he would at least not please them by getting any fatter.

His suspicions were confirmed by the old head man, whom he had heard addressed as Eph.

This ugly old sinner came to him when he had finished eating, squatted at his side, and felt about the tender parts of his body, occasionally prodding him with his thumbs, as a butcher might treat a sheep that he proposed to buy.

At the same time he pointed at the platter of stew, and addressed to the woman some words that Sam did not understand.

This was too much for the lad, who ached for a chance to knock the greasy old reprobate on the head.

Evidently it was believed that a little exercise would aid the fattening process, as his legs and hands were left loose, and he was informed that he might walk about, but was given to understand that he must remain near the fire.

Soon the two negroes who had gone off with Ben returned to the island, where they were duly welcomed, and their story was soon told.

Then old Eph spoke a few words to his dusky companions, occasionally looking and pointing up at the sky.

At the close of his remarks, to which they all listened seriously and in silence, they knelt down together, and bent their heads until they touched the ground.

The old negro took a long and twisted stick, in appearance not unlike a snake, and approached the fire.

As he raised the stick toward the kettle, a profound silence prevailing, he dropped it suddenly, uttering a yell that must have been wrung from him by most excruciating pain.

All started up, crowded around him as he danced about, holding his right arm with his left hand and uttering hideous cries, and with various gibberish wanted to know what was the matter.

"Voodoo! Voodoo!" he cried aloud.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BLACK BUTCHERS.

THERE could be no doubt that the old negro was in great pain, and Salamander Sam naturally wondered how he had hurt himself; but his brief explanation appeared to be entirely satisfactory to the others, who set up a howling that even drowned his yells.

Sam guessed that he might have had a sudden twinge of rheumatism, but it did not pass away, and his arm seemed to be so helpless that the women got about him and tied it up with a rude sling.

Whatever mysterious rite or ceremony was to have been performed there at the midnight hour was put out of the question by old Eph's strange hurt and by the consequent trouble among his companions.

They soon began to disperse, straggled away, and entered their huts.

Salamander was taken to the smallest of the hovels, and was thrust inside, while the negro man who had brought him there squatted at the low door as if to keep guard over him.

The dark little room was very nasty and ill-smelling; but, as there was a bunch of something that might pass for a bed, Sam threw himself on it, and was soon sleeping as soundly as if there were not the least danger of his being served up as Voodoo soup.

He had given no thought to the question of escape, as he had put that out of his mind as an utter impossibility.

If he should by any chance be able to rid himself of the fellow who was on guard, there were plenty more back of him, and in any event he could not hope to get clear of the island and find his way through the swamp in the darkness.

In the morning he was not only allowed to sleep late, but was not permitted to crawl out of the hovel until the sun was well up in the sky.

Those wild and half savage negroes were late risers, exercising at their odoriferous wills the constitutional prerogative of their race to turn night into day, and proud of their privilege to sleep as long as they pleased in the morning.

Of that prerogative and that privilege they had been largely deprived in a state of slavery; in a state of freedom they were going to use them for all they were worth.

The usual fire was burning when Salamander was at last suffered to emerge and get a breath of fresh air, and the big kettle was swung above it.

He was immediately pounced upon by the women, who proceeded to give him his breakfast, showing such a strong desire to stuff him as awakened his suspicions of the night previous.

His resolve of abstinence, however, vanished at the sight and smell of the victuals, which were even more appetizing than the stew that had been fed to him before.

Those negro women, barbarous as they were, had not forgotten how to cook, and had evidently got hold of some new "kinks" that were worth learning.

Surely it could make no difference to him, when they came to eat him, whether he was fat or lean, and he might as well get his satisfaction out of that good breakfast, without bothering about what might come after it.

So he ate a big breakfast, and felt so comfortable that he scarcely cared what happened.

As the morning wore on, it became evident that the negroes were preparing for some strange and mysterious ceremony.

The big kettle was lifted from its place, carried to the lake, and brought back nearly full of water, and it was even possible that it might have been washed.

Across two tall crotched stakes near by a heavy pole was stretched, forming an arrangement such as is used in the settlements for hog-killing purposes, and two of the negroes were sharpening knives without any pretense of secrecy.

Evidently there was butchering to be done; but there was no victim in sight and ready for the slaughter—that is to say, no four-footed victim.

Salamander Sam's inevitable inference was that the pig to be killed was of the two-legged variety and the human species, and he did not have to go far to look for such a victim, as the inquiry immediately settled on himself.

His condition, from that point of view, was considerably worse than that of a criminal awaiting execution, as he had before him not only the manner of his death, but all the exceedingly unpleasant arrangements for the disposal of his remains after death.

Already, in his horrified imagination, he saw himself duly slaughtered, hung up like a sheep, divided into joints and cuts, boiling in that kettle, and passing into the stomachs of those dirty and disreputable negroes.

His death was not to be an execution, but a butchery—a prospect so appalling that he sat there in a stupor, and thoughts whirled and eddied about in his brain until he no longer had clear ideas of anything.

Old Eph, the head man of the negro village, was the master of ceremonies, and everything was ordered and managed by him, though he seemed to be in poor condition for his task that morning.

He shuffled about slowly and with difficulty, his right arm tied up, apparently helpless, and his rugged countenance occasionally contorted by pain and looking uglier than ever.

He carried his crooked stick with his left hand, gesturing feebly with it as he gave his orders, and under his directions, when the preparations appeared to be completed, all the men and women and children squatted in an irregular circle around the fire.

Then he solemnly approached Salamander, felt him over and prodded him as he had done the night before, and grunted out his satisfaction at the condition of the subject.

At his order two negro men seized the lad, who was then quite incapable of offering any resistance, and partly led and partly dragged him down into the circle.

This, then, was the crisis of the affair, and the butchering was about to begin.

Suddenly old Eph dropped his stick, shivering as if with an ague, and the color of his wrinkled face changed to an ashy blue.

"Dat's a col' wind," he chattered—"a'mighty col' wind."

None of the others seemed to feel any cold wind, and they stared at him wonderingly, and began to crowd about him.

This matter drew their attention so closely that they failed to perceive the approach of another person, who came upon them from the

direction of the water as swiftly and as silently as a shadow.

Yet it was no shadow, but unmistakably a woman, and a black woman at that, tall and gaunt, and with a really commanding presence when she approached the group, as if she owned the land and ruled the tribe.

"Obi! Obi!" muttered old Eph, as he shivered again and sunk upon his knees, and all the others, looking up and recognizing her, prostrated themselves before her.

Salamander Sam opened his eyes, looked up, and his heart gave a jump as he recognized Celia, the old negress whom he had often seen at Colonel Tremper's.

Had she come there to help him? If so, what could she do to turn those savage negroes from their purpose?

Judging by the respect and reverence with which she was received, it would seem that she must have some influence among them.

Old Eph was the first to recover his upright position and address her.

"W'ot sort o' wind blowed you in yer', Miss Cely?"

"An Obi wind," she answered, severely.

"I 'lowed it mus' be dat, beca'se I felt it blowin'."

"Dat ain't all you's felt, ole man, I reckon. Yes, 'twas an Obi wind dat blowed me in, an' I's come on Obi business, too."

"W'ot sort o' Obi business?"

"I's come to stop some ob de foolishness ob you durn saphheaded niggers. 'F you t'ink I don't know w'ot games you's up to, you don't unnerstand' ol' Cely yit. W'ot you gwine ter do wid dat young buckra dar?"

The old man pointed significantly at the kettle and the rest of the apparatus.

"Yes, I knowed it; but you's gwine ter drop all dat now. Juss turn dat young buckra loose an' sen' him home."

"Cain't do dat, Miss Cely."

"Don't tell me you cain't."

"But I's got ter, Miss Cely. Dat boy's done been paid fur, an' we's got ter kill him."

"Yes, an' I know w'ot white man paid yer. His name is Morley Plympton, and Obi hates him. 'Stead o' takin' dat picayune bit o' money, why didn't you go fur all he had, when he's got loads of it?"

The old man scratched his head with his left hand, and looked around mournfully, as if bewailing a lost opportunity.

"Didn't know dat, Miss Cely. But we's sworn on de big kittle to wipe out dat boy."

"You cain't do it, Eph. Dat boy's footoo."

"Who says he's footoo?"

"I say it. Wanter know who I am? Who makes de witch ball an' de cha'm like me? Who makes de Obi wind blow like I kin? Is dar any Voodoo queen dis side o' Orleans who kin hol' a cannell to me?"

"Dar ain't nobody," admitted Eph. "We know yer, Miss Cely. You's big an' pow'ful. You's Obi's right han'. We knows dat. But you cain't make us bu'st de oaf we sworn on de big kittle."

"Den somefin' else 'll hab to go bu'st. How's dat a'm o' yourn, ol' man? Don't it feel kinder as ef you'd be glad to hab it drop off?"

Old Eph winced at her words, and his face was contorted with pain.

"Dat's how it feels hey? Obi hit it las' night. Jess at de midnight hour Obi hit dat a'm."

"Dat's so," he grunted, and the faces of all the negroes expressed abject terror.

"On'y a leetle love tap dat was, ol' man. Obi kin hit a heap harder'n dat, an' you knows it. Jess at noon Obi's gwine ter hit once mo', 'f you don't give in, an' it's mighty nigh noon now."

"Cain't do it, Miss Cely," groaned the old man. "Ebery'ting's ready, an' we cain't gib it up."

"You'll take w'ot's comin', den. See whar de sun is? Obi's done los' patience wid you—min' w'ot I tells yer, now."

The sun was standing right over the kettle. Old Eph blinked up at it, and at Celia's skinny hand upraised and pointing toward the luminary, and a look of irresolution mingled with that of pain in his face; but he shut his lips tightly and said nothing.

All the negroes shaded their eyes with their hands, and gazed at the sun; but all started and shrieked together as the old man uttered an unearthly yell and dropped on the ground.

Yell after yell came from his wide open mouth, and his face was twisted with a look of mortal agony.

Those who ran to his help perceived that his left leg was drawn up as his right arm had been, and that he was evidently in great pain.

"Didn't I tol' yer so?" screamed Celia. "Stan' out ag'inst me, will yer? an' see w'ot comes ob it! Did Obi hit hard den, ol' man? He kin hit a heap harder'n dat."

"Take it off, Miss Cely!" shrieked Eph. "Take it off, an' I'll do w'ot yer says."

The negress walked to where he lay, slowly, and with an air of conscious triumph, and the others shrunk back before her as if in fear.

From some secret recess of her attire she produced a bottle filled with a reddish liquid, poured some of its contents into the palm of her

right hand, and softly but vigorously rubbed the old man's leg.

It was not necessary to cut or remove any garment to get at the limb, as that portion of Eph's person was in a state of nature, except for the dirt.

The embrocation speedily gave him ease, and he was able to sit up, though not to stand.

"W'ot yer want me ter do, Miss Cely?" he feebly and humbly inquired.

"Turn dat young buckra loose an' sen' him home."

"Take dat Obi off, an' I'll do it, shu'."

"Ob cou'se you will. You knows better'n to lie to me. Obi hain't furgot how to hit. It'll go off, ol' man."

"W'en'll it go?"

"By de middle ob de arternoon."

"Soon's it goes off I'll turn de boy loose. W'ot'll I say to dat w'ite man if he comes yer?"

"Tell him he's dead. 'Spects you hain't furgot how to lie."

With these words Celia walked away majestically, and disappeared as swiftly and silently as she had come.

The old man was carried to one of the huts and made comfortable there, and Sam Startle was provided with food and guarded.

Eph was as good as his word. He had got enough, and was not disposed to fool with Obi any more.

About the middle of the afternoon he came out of the hut, walking erect and apparently free from pain.

He spoke to one of the negroes, who carried Sam Startle across the water to the main land, if any part of the swampy region could be so called, and set him free there, pointing out to him the general direction he must take to reach the place where he had been captured.

His repeating carbine and revolver were not given back to him, and he had been impressed with the belief that it would be useless to ask for them.

The return of any property that had come into the possession of the negroes was not included in the promise of old Eph to Celia.

Salamander believed, however, that he would be able to get home safely, and that there was no danger of his starving before he got there.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A SERPENT'S TOOTH.

GIDEON SCROOBY was completely crestfallen when he was informed of the failure of the swamper up the Keewanee to do the murderous work which he had employed them to do.

He had been confident of the success of that scheme, and when the news came from them that they had "got" the surveyors' party, he was sure that the deed was already done.

The return of Morley Plympton from Colonel Tremper's, hot with rage, half drunk, and wholly out of temper, knocked his exultation in the head, and drove him to the low grounds of sorrow.

He sent a spy to Colonel Tremper's place, who easily got the particulars of the manner in which the tables had been turned on the swamper, as the news contained in Rush Powell's letter had circulated among the negroes, and there could not be the slightest doubt of the escape of the surveyors.

Shortly afterward came the information that the three men, accompanied by Salamander Sam of the charmed life, had safely returned with their steamer, and that completed the discomfiture of the Scotchman.

He was very meek and submissive then, yielding in everything to Morley Plympton, who assumed the entire management of affairs, swearing loudly that the next blow would be by him, and that there should be no failure in that.

Scrooby furnished him with all the money he demanded to carry out his plans, and was greatly rejoiced when his friend and partner at last triumphantly informed him that Sam Startle had been captured by a party of wild negroes, and would soon be put out of the way, if he had not already been killed.

As reported by Plympton, this seemed to be a sure thing; but so had the attempt of the Keewanee swamper seemed to be a sure thing; yet it had proved to be a most ignominious failure.

When the Scotchman ventured to suggest this doubt to his partner, the latter scouted the idea of a mistake in his calculations.

"You don't know those niggers like I do, Gid," said he. "I have been among them enough to be sure of what they will do and how they will do it. The young snake is alone, beyond any hope of help, and their den, even if his friends could find it, is absolutely safe from attack. I tell you, Gid, that he has no more chance of escape than a sucking pig in the jaws of an alligator."

"That is all very well as an argument, Plympton; but we will need to be sure that it turns out as it seems it ought to. How 'ill you know that the work is done?"

"Oh, I am going out into the swamps, to visit the den of those wild niggers, and make sure that their agreement with me has been carried out to the letter."

"That sort of thing is more or less ager-

ous, as I have hinted to you before. It was all well enough when you hadn't a dollar, and when you were one of them, as I may say; but now that you are supposed to have become a man of property, they may think you fair game."

"Those wild niggers don't know anything about my property, Gid."

"You don't know what they may know. Anyhow, I hope you will be careful, and remember that there is an old proverb about the pitcher that goes often to the well."

"If I am a pitcher, Gid, it is my duty to pitch in, and I shall proceed to do so."

As Scrooby well knew, Morley Plympton was not merely boasting when he talked of his acquaintance with the wild negroes and other generally inaccessible outlaws in the swamps and elsewhere.

He knew them, and they knew him, as he had been among them, if not of them, in the days of his impecuniosity, when a dishonest dollar was worth quite as much to him as an honest one, and much more likely to be got.

He was well acquainted, too, with their haunts and hiding-places, and could find his way through the intricate forests and dangerous swamps by ways which he had not forgotten, although his memory of them was not as fresh and clear as it had been.

It was toward the end of the afternoon, but yet not near sunset, when he found himself in a troublesome and perplexing region of swamp, and judged that he was not far from the haunt of the wild negroes whose head man was old Eph.

It was then necessary for him to proceed cautiously, and to examine the ground ahead and on each side, in order to make sure that he was following the right course, and to keep himself from stepping unawares into the jaws of an alligator, or stirring up a venomous moccasin.

As he was looking anxiously about, in his quest of the safest and most direct route, he was surprised and startled at discovering another person in that solitary and forbidding locality.

The other person was not formidable to look at; but to Morley Plympton he was highly interesting, being no other than Sam Starfle.

As his relative had supposed him to be then out of the world or in a fair way to leave it, his appearance then and there was both startling and confusing.

Had he escaped from the wild and cruel negroes who captured him?

That seemed to be impossible; and, as it was not for a moment to be supposed that they would voluntarily turn him loose, how else could his living presence be accounted for?

At all events, there he was, free and safe, and Morley Plympton might well consider himself lucky in discovering him before his escape was made complete.

He seemed to be unarmed—it was certain that he had nothing like a rifle—and if an able-bodied man could not overpower a lad like that, it would be queer indeed.

Morley Plympton carried a revolver under his coat, and his easiest plan would obviously have been to shoot down his young relative where he stood.

Perhaps, too, it would have been the surest and safest plan.

There was not the slightest chance of detection, and plenty of deep holes in the swamp offered a speedy and effectual means of concealing the detestable crime.

But as there was no danger that Sam could escape his clutches, he wanted to know how he had got away from the wild negroes, and therefore he determined to stop and question him before making an end of him.

As for Sam, he did not catch sight of his vicious and deadly foe, being intently occupied with trying to solve the puzzle of a way out of the swamp.

He stood just then on a broad and apparently solid piece of ground; but the end of it was just before him, and beyond it there was nothing but the dark and dangerous water, with an occasional hummock that might afford a risky footing.

As he looked up to see what his chances might be in another direction, he espied Morley Plympton, whom he instantly recognized as the "Mr. Morley" who had hired his father to wreck the brig, and as his own inveterate and unrelenting enemy.

He turned pale at that sight, but there was no sign of trembling about him.

He had escaped from what seemed to be certain death at the hands of many men, and why should he fear one man?

Morley Plympton spoke to him in as friendly and encouraging a tone as he could assume, though it was impossible to conceal his vicious anxiety.

"Hold on there, my boy! I'll come and show you how to get out."

Having noted his course and measured his steps, he leaped lightly from one hummock to another, and landed on the solid piece of ground where Sam was standing.

The lad might have turned and fled back over the route by which he had reached that spot;

but that would take him toward the negroes' haunt again, and he saw no good reason why he should run away.

If Plympton should disclose a hostile intent, what was to hinder him from ducking down between the legs of his enemy and upsetting him into the water?

Sam felt himself fully able to work such a scheme, but just then he preferred to wait and see what the man meant.

What he saw was the introduction of a new element into the situation, which caused a sudden and startling change of scene.

When Morley Plympton made his last spring from a hummock to the piece of dry ground, he alighted on a moccasin snake that was lying motionless there near the water.

His weight did not drop upon it heavily enough to kill or disable it, but sufficiently to arouse and enrage the venomous reptile, which raised itself instantly and struck its fangs into his leg.

Plympton knew at once what had happened, without the frightened glance that disclosed the serpent to him, and a cry of horror burst from his lips.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DASTARDLY DEED.

SALAMANDER SAM was scarcely less shocked by this tragic mishap than Morley Plympton was.

A splendid opportunity was offered him then and there to get rid of his mean and murderous enemy once for all, and that without any act of his own and without any actual responsibility for the catastrophe.

Providence had visibly intervened in his behalf, and all he had to do was to let Providence carry out its contract.

If such a thought passed through his mind, it must have been instantly dismissed, as it surely did not have the slightest influence on his action.

He saw before him a man who was in immediate peril of a horrible death, but whose life might be saved by instant and heroic methods.

That was the only thought which stuck to him, and on that thought he acted at once.

Grasping the stick which he had been using to assist his steps in the swamp, he brought it down on the head of the serpent before it could slide away, killing it instantly.

He had heard it as a common saying that in cases of snakebite no remedies will prove of any avail until the snake has been killed.

Morley Plympton had dropped on the ground, and his quite uncomely face was made uglier than ever by its expression of abject terror.

"I am killed!" he moaned piteously. "I am snakebit and killed!"

"Not yet," promptly replied Salamander, as he dropped down beside him. "Give me your knife."

"Be quick about it, or your chance is gone!" sharply ordered the lad as Plympton fumbled nervously in his pocket. "There—that's right. Got any whisky?"

"Yes."

"Go for it, then."

Sam quickly cut open the man's trousers leg, and discovered the wound on his ankle, though it was but a faint puncture.

"I'm going to cut you a bit," said he. "Don't jump if it hurts a little, and don't spill the whisky, whatever you do."

He lost no time in talk, but with the sharpest blade of the pocket-knife made in Plympton's leg an incision that brought the blood pretty freely.

Then he jerked a buckskin thong from his pocket, and tied it above the man's knee as tight as he could draw it.

Then he bent down, applied his lips to the wound he had made, and sucked vigorously, stopping now and then to eject what he had drawn out, and to hastily rinse his mouth with water from the swamp.

He kept this up until he could draw nothing more from the wound, and then paused to note the effect of the double operation that had been going on.

He did not like the appearance of the leg, which had become cold, with some discoloration and swelling; yet there was not as much of that as might have been expected.

Morley Plympton had been clinging tightly to his whisky flask, and had succeeded in absorbing a considerable portion of its contents; but he was rapidly growing weak and unable to hold it to his lips.

Sam took it from his hands, and fed the whisky to him as long as he retained consciousness enough to enable him to swallow it, or let it run down his throat—in fact, until he fell over and lay in a stupor.

The lad corked the bottle carefully to preserve the remainder of the liquor, and put it away in the pocket of his overcoat.

As there was nothing else that he could then do, he waited and watched the bitten man, wondering whether the stupor that had overtaken him was caused by the swift and insidious working of the poison or by the effects of the liquor.

He had heard much talk of snakebites in a region where venomous reptiles were plenty, and

considered himself fairly well posted concerning their treatment.

His father and others had spoken of whisky as an infallible remedy when taken soon enough and in sufficient quantities, and August Engel had carefully explained to him the nature and action of snake poison and the best means of counteracting it.

Therefore he was sure that he had done all that he could do under the circumstances.

He knew a plant whose leaves, when chewed and applied to the wound, were supposed to be a good remedy; but there was no such plant growing about him or anywhere in sight, and he could not risk a hunt for it.

From what the professor had told him, he presumed that there was a struggle going on in the man's system between the two poisons, and he was strongly inclined to believe that whisky would get the best of it.

This presumption was strengthened after a while by the fact that Plympton was evidently asleep, his stertorous breathing proving that his lungs at least were in good working order.

Salamander also perceived that though the discoloration below the knee had increased, there were no signs of it above the place where he had tied the ligature, and he considered this another favorable symptom.

After waiting until he had fully satisfied himself concerning these two points, he untied the thong, and its removal evidently gave the patient ease, though Plympton was too completely stupefied to be aware of what was done to him.

"The durned cuss ain't goin' to make a die of it," muttered Sam, "though I don't know but he ought, and I reckon I'd have done best to let him rip; but that don't seem to be my stripe, and mebbe I can't help myself. What's goin' to come has got to come."

So the young fatalist decided that he would remain with his helpless enemy and guard him from the dangers of the swamp until he should be sufficiently recovered to take care of himself, or at least until he should awake from his heavy sleep.

At the same time it must be admitted that he was not entirely pleased with his work, as he occasionally grumbled and growled to himself about his foolishness in doing so much to save the life of such a relentless foe.

"I ain't afeard of him, though," muttered Salamander, "and mebbe I can make him help me find the way out of the swamp."

There was something in this, as night was rapidly coming on, darkness already descending upon the swamp, and he knew that it would be useless and dangerous for him to attempt to make his way out unassisted before morning.

If he could have got through the worst of it before dark, he might have been able to go on with a fair chance of getting to Colonel Tremper's, or striking some other house, but that prospect had been shut out by the accident which caused his stoppage.

His only hope of finding his way out in the nighttime lay in the ability and disposition of Morley Plympton to act as his guide.

So it might be as well for him to await the recovery of the bitten man, and in the mean time, lest Plympton might be inclined in the near future to "cut up rusty," it would be only right and fair to disarm him.

Salamander Sam searched his stupefied patient, finding a revolver, which he transferred to his own person, and waited as patiently as he could.

The stars came out and the moon rose, and the weird desolation of the swamp was made more doleful by a continuous concert of hideous noises, and the man in whose system the two poisons were supposed to be struggling lay motionless, though not noiseless, adding his portion of unpleasantness to the situation.

As he did not die, and seemed to be in no danger of dying, Sam was convinced that he was then in a whisky stupor, and still waited for it to break.

It must have been near midnight when Morley Plympton began to stir, to groan, to grunt, and finally to open his eyes and gradually raise himself to a sitting posture.

"What's up?" he growled hoarsely, as he rubbed his eyes.

"You're up," answered Salamander, "and durned lucky you are to be able to get up, too."

"What's the matter, I say?"

"Don't you know that you've been snakebit? It's a wonder that you're alive now to hear me tell it."

After finishing its work in fighting the snake poison, the heavy load of whisky had unsettled Plympton's interior arrangements, and he was clamoring to be let loose.

He vomited freely, which was doubtless a good thing for him, as he felt decidedly better when that operation was over, though very weak and faint.

"Take a hair o' the dog," suggested Salamander, as he handed him the whisky flask, but insisted that he should touch the seductive beverage lightly.

"Give me your hand, young man," requested the patient, and he was helped up, felt his legs, and shook himself.

"I seem to be all right," he observed—"all alive, anyhow. I feel as if I'd been pulled through a knothole, and about as shaky as a sick chicken in a high wind. My left leg is very queer, too; but I reckon I'm able to navigate. I suppose, young chap, that you would like to get away from here."

"I have been waiting for you to get well enough to start," answered Salamander.

"Waiting for me, hey? I suppose you want me to be your guide, then."

"I have been waiting because I was taking care of you. Don't you really know that you were snakebit?"

"Oh, yes, I remember that; but I judge that the snake was harmless."

"Here's your knife," observed Sam, "that I took to cut a hole and suck the p'ison out of that snakebite."

"You did that, hey? What did you want to cut me for, when I had plenty of whisky to kill the poison? That's what pulled me through."

"Well, I must say that you're the most ungrateful cuss I ever came across. Here I've been doin' for you what I had no business to do, and watchin' you and waitin' on you, and that's the thanks I get for it. Go along, old hard head! I don't want you for a guide. Run right along, and I'll look out for myself."

"Don't get huffy, young chap. My head is not clear yet, and I don't know just what I am saying. I am thankful to you, and of course I will show you the way out. Give me another bite of that bottle."

When he had taken his "bite," he restored the bottle to its place in his own pocket, and directed Salamander to follow him.

He led the way, slowly and somewhat unsteadily, following back for a little distance the route which Sam had taken to reach the spot of solid ground, his young relative watching him closely all the while to make sure that he was not aiming for the haunt of the wild negroes.

Salamander was convinced, indeed, that the island had been Morley Plympton's destination when he met him.

The statements made by old Eph to Celia concerning the white man who had paid the negroes had not escaped the sharp ears of the lad, who had no doubt that the man whose life he had probably saved had intended his own death, and that it was no fault of his that his intentions had failed.

It was to be supposed that he had been on his way to make sure of the wicked work when Sam met him, and therefore it would be well to watch him and guard against him.

It seemed, however, that Plympton saw no occasion for going further in that direction, as he turned as soon as the nature of the ground would allow him to, and struck the route by which he had come into the swamp.

Then all was plain sailing, as there was light enough, and Plympton proved to be a good pilot, though Sam was occasionally obliged to assist his steps, and now and then he halted to rest, complaining of the weakness and numbness of his leg.

As a general thing, however, Salamander Sam kept himself pretty well in the rear, and watched his leader narrowly for any sign of a hostile intent.

The exercise and occasional sips of whisky invigorated and brightened the man who had been snakebit, until his tongue got limbered up, as well as his legs, and he sought to satisfy his curiosity concerning Sam's escape from the negroes.

"What were you doing out here in the swamp when I met you?" he inquired.

"Been huntin'."

Salamander was not prepared for this line of inquiry.

"All alone and so far from anywhere? That's queer. Did you get lost?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Where's your gun?"

"Lost that, too."

"That is very strange. I can scarcely think of anything stranger than that."

"Except a snakebite, mebber."

"Not even except a snakebite. It is a risky business for a young fellow like you to be wandering about the swamps alone. There are wild negroes about this region, and they are just vicious and cruel enough to snap you up and slaughter you. I wonder that you did not run against some of them."

"I did," observed Sam, who thought he might as well let that much light in on the subject.

"They got my gun."

"Indeed! How did you happen to get away from them alive?"

"Well, I reckon they didn't have any use for a chap of my size and style."

"That is most remarkably queer. So they let you go of their own accord. Was that really the way of it?"

"That was jest the way of it, mister. I thought it would sound sorter queer to you," he added with a significant emphasis.

Plympton did not care to question his follower on that point any further; but the lad's apparently easy escape doubtless awakened again in his breast the viciousness that had prompted his journey into the swamp.

After traveling in silence for awhile, he felt in his pistol-pocket and missed his revolver.

"I had a pistol," said he. "I wonder what has become of it?"

"Mebbe you dropped it where you got snakebit."

"Maybe I didn't. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes—I've got it."

"Give it to me."

"Oh, no. I mean to keep that."

"You have taken my property, and mean to keep it? Why so?"

"Seems to me that you owe me a little something for takin' care of you after the snakebite."

"And you mean to take your pay without my permission? That is queer."

"A good many things is queer, mister. You said that your head was queer awhile ago, and mebbe it ain't right yet. Anyhow, I mean to keep that pistol for a while. You go right along and lead the way out of this swamp, and I'll give it back to you when I get ready."

Morley Plympton's head was clear enough to enable him to understand that the odds of pistol and position were against him just then, and he could not help recalling the time when Sam Startle had stood at his father's body and faced him with a revolver.

That remembrance naturally irritated him, and the cool manner in which Salamander had confiscated his pistol—nothing less than an act of robbery, from the Plympton point of view—was quite enough to obliterate any obligation in connection with the snakebite.

Besides, the great object which had been so often attempted at considerable cost was not yet accomplished, and why should he not take advantage of the present opportunity?

He put on as genial a tone and manner as it was possible for him to assume, and talked to Sam in such a friendly and confidential style that the lad's suspicions were partially lulled, and his watchfulness, already somewhat blunted by loss of sleep, was by no means what it might have been.

Now and then he halted, as if doubtful of the course he should take, until Sam caught up with him, but would soon determine the direction and go on.

There seemed to be nothing suspicious in this, and yet the guide was maturing a plan which might almost have induced Salamander, if he could have guessed it, to shoot him in the back.

They had reached a broad and still, and apparently deep lagoon, and there was an occasional faint lighting up of the sky, which was gradually beginning to assume the grayish hue that betokens the approach of dawn, when Plympton halted again, and appeared to be really puzzled about the course.

"I thought I could find the way without much trouble," he said, as Sam came up to him, "and I believe we have come right so far; but things don't look at night as they do in the daytime, and I must confess that I don't know whether we ought to keep straight ahead or turn off to the right."

"How about the stars?" suggested Salamander. "They ought to give the course to a man who knows 'em."

"That is just the point I was going to look into; but I shall need your help. I suppose your eyes are much better than mine, as I am rather near-sighted. Do you know the Great Dipper when you see it?"

"You may jest bet I do," answered Sam, who had learned something of sky lore during his residence on the sea-shore, and was quite proud of his knowledge.

"I wish, then, that you would tell me whether that is the Great Dipper which we see yonder through the break in the trees."

Salamander looked in the direction indicated, giving his entire attention to the small space of sky that was disclosed by the break in the trees.

He did not see the Dipper, but thought it might be there, and looked yet more closely.

The next moment he saw nothing.

Morley Plympton, drawing back his right fist, struck him a terrible blow on the side of the head, knocking him over into the water, where he sunk like a stone.

His dastardly assailant, with a stick in his hand, looked eagerly down at the disturbed surface of the lagoon, watching for him to rise; but the ripples subsided, and the water was again dark and smooth, as if no tragedy had disturbed its placid depths.

"He is fool for the 'gators now," muttered Plympton, with a deep sigh of relief.

Then, as if frightened by the thought of his cowardly and murderous deed, he turned and ran away as fast as his legs could carry him.

He had no longer any doubt of the course he should take.

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE BUG-HUNTER.

If Morley Plympton had waited a little longer and looked a little more closely, he might have seen a pair of eyes watching him as he ran away, and those eyes, though not as bright as they usually were, would have been those of Sam Startle.

Salamander Sam had been stunned by the

blow that knocked him into the water, and had sunk instantly; but the sudden immersion restored him to his senses sufficiently to give him a fair idea of what was the matter and what he ought to do.

He could swim like a water rat, having trained himself in the surfs and storms of the briny, as well as in smooth and fresh water, and the emergency gave him a splendid opportunity to prove his abilities in that line.

Not doubting that Morley Plympton had attempted to make an end of him, and expecting that his enemy would want to be sure that the work had been thoroughly done, he at once determined that he would not afford him that satisfaction if he could help it.

So the young Salamander swam under water for a short distance, heading down the lagoon, and struck the shore a couple of yards below where Plympton was waiting for him to appear.

Hardly had he caught hold of a hanging limb and drawn himself up to a level with the bank, when he heard the flying footsteps of his adversary, and saw him running away into the forest.

The feeling of safety which this knowledge brought him, together with his weak physical condition, combined to produce a reaction, and Salamander was no longer as safe as he had supposed himself to be.

The blow that stunned him had been forcibly delivered, leaving an injury that was not at first apparent, and the swim under the water, which his resolute will alone had enabled him to accomplish, had so used up the little strength he had left, that when he struck the bank he was utterly exhausted.

He felt himself giving way, numbness taking possession of his limbs, and a feeling of lassitude creeping over his body, which was as sweet as it was dangerous.

The feeling was somewhat similar to that of the traveler about to freeze, who only wants to give up, lie down, and drop into rest; but Salamander had sense enough to know that he must not yield to it if he wanted to live.

He exerted himself to get up on the bank, where it would be safe to lie down and doze or swoon as nature might require; but he perceived that he had not strength enough to lift himself out of the water.

All he could do was to cling to the branch and keep himself from drowning, and it was to be supposed that he would not long be able to retain his despairing grasp.

Even if he could hold on there until he should gain strength and recover his senses, there was a big chance that he might be discovered and appropriated by some nosing alligator.

As he felt the numbness creeping up his body, and knew that it might soon be expected to paralyze his arms and attack his head, he put all his remaining strength into a despairing cry for help.

Of course he had not the faintest idea that any help would come to him, nor did any hope or thought accompany the cry; but it was forced from him without any will or purpose of his own.

It was heard by a man wandering in the woods who had also heard the retreating footsteps of Morley Plympton, and who had approached the scene of the tragedy to discover who was there and what was the matter.

Silently and cautiously he had come toward the lagoon, like one accustomed to creeping and expectant of finding enemies rather than friends, but at the sound of Salamander Sam's despairing cry his style and action changed instantly.

Locating the sound without giving it a second thought, he hastened to the edge of the lagoon, parted the boughs and bushes, and caught sight of Sam's arm as his nerveless grasp was slipping from the bough.

The next moment the arm was seized by one hand, and then the collar by another, and the lad was lifted out of the water and laid on a green and dry spot under the trees.

Just as he was taken from the lagoon a big alligator shoved his ugly snout up near him, showing how narrow his escape had been.

The stranger immediately set at work to restore to life the person to whose aid he had come so opportunely, and went at it as if he knew what he was about.

He nearly stripped the lad, removing the garments from his limp form neatly and expeditiously, and hastily examined him.

It was apparent that drowning was not what was the matter, and the coldness and livid color of the extremities suggested at once the best remedy that was available.

The stranger produced a whisky flask, one of the flat and familiar kind, and forced a few drops of the fluid into Salamander's mouth, holding his head so that it might run down his throat.

Then he poured some of the same stuff into his hand, and vigorously rubbed with it the lad's feet and ankles and hands and wrists.

Having kept this up for some time, and perceiving by the gradual return of warmth that the circulation was being restored, he again raised his patient's head and shoulders and poured into his mouth some more of the whisky.

Sam coughed, sneezed, and sputtered out a portion of the liquid, and the forced effort aroused him from his deathlike swoon.

Day was then breaking, and when he opened his eyes it was light enough for him to perceive and understand his surroundings.

He saw bending over him a middle-aged man, tall, gaunt and bronzed, with straight black hair, and, except for his clothing, much the appearance of an Indian.

His clothing, however, was a neat and tolerably clean suit of corduroy, the trousers thrust into high boots, the blouse-like coat abundantly provided with pockets, and his face shaded by a big straw hat.

His bearded countenance spoke so plainly of intelligence and kindness, that Salamander Sam, as his senses gradually revived, was drawn to him immediately.

"Try to take a sup of this whisky now," urged the stranger. "It will give you strength until you can get something that will suit your case better."

Sam manfully endeavored to do as he was bid, and succeeded in swallowing a little of the liquor.

It had the intended effect, and he sat up, breathed freely, rubbed his eyes, and looked about.

"Who are you?" he asked, with a feeble attempt at a smile.

"My name is Reuben Hensel, if that tells you anything. Some of the people about here call me Scary Rube, because I have so much to do with snakes and that sort of thing, and others call me the Bug-Hunter. What is your name?"

"Sam Startle—Salamander Sam as some people know me."

"Never heard of ye, but ye startled me a little while ago. I want to know who you are and how you got into that fix; but you musn't do any talking yet a while. Let me help you up and see if you can stand. Yes, that's all right. Now let's see if you have the use of your legs. Better than I would have thought. Do you think you can walk a half-mile or so, taking it easy and with me to help?"

"Give me the chance," answered Sam, as he took a few feeble steps and brought up against a tree. "If there's anything to eat at the end of it, I reckon I can make the rifle."

"That is a good sign, and I think you will do fairly. Wait till I pick up my plunder."

Salamander perceived that the "plunder" to be picked up consisted of a breech-loading gun, with one barrel for bullets and one for shot, and a fine net like a scoopnet that was suggestive of bug-hunting.

Reuben Hensel also carried in a belt a revolver and a hunting-knife, and was well supplied with cartridges.

"You won't have far to go," he said, as he gently grasped Sam's arm. "I live near here."

"You—live—out here?"

"Yes, indeed! but there is nothing wonderful about that. I have to stay about here to carry on the bug-hunting business and the rest of it. I came out early this morning to look for a rare bird that is only to be found near the water and at daybreak. Keep quiet now, my young friend, and let me do the talking for both until I can get you home and give you something to eat."

Salamander did his best to obey this injunction, thankful for his rescue and the help that was so kindly given him, and after about half an hour's walk, including a brief rest now and then, they came to a cabin in a live-oak glade.

It deserved to be called something better than a cabin, as it was in reality a one-story house, small and built of logs, and of far better quality than might have been expected in that locality.

The logs were all hewn, and were so carefully jointed and closely fitted together as to give the building an appearance of solidity and comfort.

One would have supposed that it could not possibly have been erected without the joint labor of at least two men and a regular "house raising;" yet, as Reuben Hensel afterward informed his young friend, no hands had assisted his own in its construction.

He had rolled his logs to the site, hewing and jointing and fitting them on the ground, and had thus placed them in position by means of a derrick which he had contrived and put up, his only tools being an ax, an auger, a large gimlet, a saw, a drawing-knife, and the "frow" with which he rived his shingles and clapboards from cypress logs.

Beautiful vines were trained up the walls, and all about it were blooming shrubs and parterres of bedded plants that had been discovered in the forests and swamps.

Salamander had already begun to respect highly this solitary Bug-Hunter, and that feeling was increased when he entered the house and became better acquainted with his new friend.

He was immediately undressed, and was placed on a soft and comfortable bed, where he could rest at his ease, while Hensel hastened to prepare something for him to eat.

"All you have to do now is to keep quiet," said the Bug-Hunter. "I am going to be a

grandmother to you until you get straightened out and strengthened up, and you must mind me."

It was easy for Sam to obey just then, as he was entirely given up to staring and wondering at the marvelous things in the Bug-Hunter's abode.

What he saw there would be enough to frighten a person who should be suddenly introduced to the collection without knowing its meaning or purpose.

It was, indeed, both the living-room and workshop of a naturalist and taxidermist who was enthusiastic and indefatigable in the pursuit of his profession, and the collection was a museum of curiosities with many very valuable features.

Stuffed beasts and birds, lifelike in appearance and in natural positions, occupied every available "coign of vantage," while stuffed reptiles swung from the rafters, jars and bottles of snakes' ood on shelves, and cases of humming birds, butterflies and bugs ornamented the walls. Salamander Sam had never seen or expected to see anything like it, and he was ready to declare that a visit to that cabinet of curiosities was enough to pay him for all the pains and perils he had recently undergone.

He longed to ask questions, but decided that he had better obey orders and keep quiet, so he just lay there and stared.

CHAPTER XXIX.

REUBEN HENSEL'S STORY.

REUBEN HENSEL quickly prepared a hot drink which he administered to Sam, and the effect upon the lad was so refreshing and invigorating that he sat up in his bed and ate with a ravenous appetite the food that was given him.

"I think you will do now," said Hensel, as he lighted a pipe and seated himself near his patient. "But you need rest, and will have to keep quiet for a while before you attempt to find your way to your home or friends. I see that you are looking at my curiosities, and I suppose they must seem very queer to you."

"What are they?" queried Salamander.

"They are my stock in trade, partly for profit and partly for pleasure. They call me the Bug-Hunter, you know, and that means that I am a naturalist. I catch and stuff beasts and birds and that sort of thing, and send them to the North for sale. As I understand my business thoroughly, I have no trouble in getting rid of my work at paying prices. Part of those you see are ready for orders; but most of them I have prepared for my own amusement, and I keep them for my own pleasure. Yet they are really the most valuable of my collections, and I prize them beyond money."

"I am afraid that I am keepin' you from your work," suggested Salamander.

"Not a bit of it, Sammy, my boy. My work is my play, and my play is my work, and I employ my time to please myself, as I am my own master. It seems to me that you must have sustained some injury which I don't exactly understand, and I want you to tell me just what has happened to you, so that I may know what to do for you, being something of a medical man, you see."

"I was knocked on the head," answered Salamander, "and fell into the water. A man who was with me did that job, and then he ran away."

"The wicked flee when no man pursueth. I thought I heard somebody running, and that was what drew me to the spot where I found you. Who was the man?"

"His name is Morley Plympton."

"Morley Plympton?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I know too much of him, and have good cause to wish that I had never seen him or heard of him. I know enough of him to be sure that the dirty scoundrel is mean and cowardly enough for that or any other dastardly deed. I want you to tell me how he came to do that, and how you happened to be mixed up with him?"

"It is a long story," observed Sam.

"But I want to hear it all, if you are willing to tell it, as I am now more interested in you than ever."

Salamander Sam proceeded to tell his entire story, or as much of it as he knew; and Reuben Hensel listened to the narrative with intense interest, occasionally stopping the lad to caution him against getting excited, or to give him a taste of that refreshing draught when he showed signs of weakness.

Hensel took a lively interest in Sam's account of his connection with the surveyors.

"I have met them both," said he, "and they are the right sort. Rush Powell is a fine young fellow, but Engel is my favorite, as he has an amount of scientific information which he does not give away to everybody, and I would be glad to know more of him."

Salamander brought his story down to the time of Plympton's cowardly attempt upon his life, and his rescue by the Bug-Hunter, for which he was very thankful, declaring that he would surely have perished if it had not been for that timely aid.

"I suppose you are right about that," said

Hensel, "as a big alligator was about to go for you when I lifted you out, and you were so badly used up that you could not have held on there any longer. The fact is, my young friend, that you were so miraculously preserved, and not for the first time, that it seems right to consider you as bearing a charmed life, though it would not be well to trust too much to the charm, and I would particularly advise you to keep clear of Morley Plympton, as it is no fault of his that you are living now."

"What do you know about him, Mr. Hensel?" inquired Sam. "Has he ever tried any of his games on you?"

"One of the worst and meanest. It was no bodily harm that he inflicted or attempted; but he did me damage that can never be repaired, and I shall hate him for it as long as I live. He was the last man, too, from whom I would have expected such an injury, as I had done him a great favor."

"That's his style, though," suggested the boy.

"To return evil for good? I believe you are right, and it was certainly his style in my case. When I first met him I knew him as a poor devil, a vagabond with a bad reputation, who mixed with the worst of the swamp outlaws, and was supposed to be not above robbing a house or knocking down a traveler for a few dollars."

"It seems that he had a quarrel with some of his swamp companions, and I found him lying in the woods, badly beaten, with a leg broken, and unable to get where he could procure food or attention. The swampers had left him there to die, and there he would have died if I had not picked him up and carried him to my house. I had not built this house then, but was living in a shabby little cabin a mile or so from here."

"I set the man's leg, and fed and nursed him for more than two weeks, until he was able to go away."

"He told me that he had known better days, and I sympathized with him, not on that account, but because he professed repentance for the life he had been leading about here, and declared his intention of turning over a new leaf and trying to make a man of himself again."

"I sympathized with him to the extent of giving him a few dollars when he went away, all the money I could spare, and a letter to a friend of mine who might give him a start."

"After that I neither saw nor heard anything of Morley Plympton for several weeks, and then he came down upon me in a style that I am not likely ever to forget."

"It was late at night, and I was awake from a sound sleep by knocking at the door, and when I asked who was there I was answered by the familiar tones of Morley Plympton."

"I got up and opened the door, and he rushed in, followed by four of the wildest and roughest swampers I had ever seen. They seized me at once, bound me, and tied me to a chair, while they proceeded to carry out the purpose of their visit, which proved to be robbery."

"It seemed that Plympton had told them that I kept money in the cabin, and had led them there to get hold of it. They failed to find any money, but did find the small stock of whisky that I kept on hand, and a keg of alcohol that I used for preserving specimens."

"They finished the whisky, and fell back on the alcohol, which set their blood afire, and then they began to smash things, showing a special spite against my stuffed animals and birds."

"I reminded Plympton of what I had done for him, and begged him to persuade his companions to spare my precious pets; but he only laughed at me, and declared that I deserved more than that for hiding my money."

"Some of them were strongly in favor of taking me out and hanging me until I should confess and show them the hiding-place of my money; but I gave them the few dollars I had in my clothes, and assured them so solemnly that there was no more in the house, that they at last decided that it was not worth while to worry me any further."

"I suppose the ignorant swampers did not know that they were hurting me worse by destroying my precious collections than they could have done by hanging me; but Morley Plympton well knew how I valued my specimens, and the mean wretch laughed and encouraged them while they were tearing the very heart out of me."

"They finished the keg of alcohol, and by the time they were through with that they had made an end of nearly everything I cared for."

"Some of them were wild enough then to want to set fire to the shanty and leave me there to perish in the flames; but they compromised on taking me outside where I could see the conflagration and enjoy it, and when they had started the fire they went away, yelling and whooping."

"I pulled myself loose when they were gone, and managed to extinguish the flames, but saved nothing worth speaking of."

"The labor of years was lost to me then, and that was not the worst of it, as some specimens were destroyed which I may never be able to find again. I was looking for one of the rare birds this morning when I met you."

Salamander Sam was grieved by this story of disaster, and sympathized most sincerely with his new friend.

"That's a durned sight worse than anythin' that has happened to me," said he. "I've always come out clear so far; but there don't seem to be any way for you ever to get even."

"So it looks to me. Some of my specimens were not only worth considerable in mere money, but I am sure that I valued the collection more than any of that crew valued their lives. No, I shall never get even; but I have often felt as if I would be willing to kill a few of them in part payment."

"Have they ever troubled you since then?" inquired Salamander.

"Not once, and I do not believe that I would have been troubled by them then if that wretch of a Plympton had not led them on. I built this house, which is reasonably safe against everything but fire, and have become acquainted with all the swamper, I suppose, white and black, honest and dishonest, and have never had the least cause to complain of them. Indeed, I am sure that some of them are very fond of me, and they all know that if one of them finds a rare beast or bird or reptile he can find a ready market by bringing it to me."

"How about Morley Plympton, Mr. Hensel?"

"I have never met him from that day to this, and I doubt if I have ever been as near to him as I was this morning. If I had known that it was he who was running through the woods then I might have been so hot on his trail that I would not have heard your cry. I shall not seek him; but, if I should come across him, he would not be likely to get away from me."

"I suppose he thinks he has settled me," observed Sam, "and that he is sure of being a rich man now."

"I have heard lately that he had come into possession of a big property, and it reminded me of what is said in the Bible about the prosperity of the wicked; but I am now convinced that he must come to the end of his tether before long. If the law don't bring him up with a round turn, something else will. But it is now more than ever necessary, my young friend, that you should be kept clear of him, and I am going to see you in safety among your friends before I let go of you."

Reuben Hensel examined Salamander carefully, and could not discover that he had sustained any serious injury; but he was of the opinion that the lad was not yet fit to travel, and accordingly kept him quiet until the next morning.

Then he fitted some cartridges to the pistol in Sam's possession, loaded it after removing the spoiled charges, took his breech-loader, and they set out together.

CHAPTER XXX.

SQUEEZING OUT THE TRUTH.

THERE was feverish excitement in Colonel Tremper's house after the departure of Aunt Celia on her Ohi mission to the wild negroes.

After the solemn ceremony of sticking a pin into the arm of the clay image at the midnight hour, Eva Tremper and Rush Powell followed the rest of the family to bed; but there was not much sleep for either of them, as their worry about the fate of Sam Startle made them wakeful.

Early in the morning Powell sent a messenger to Coahoula, to inform Engel and Priddle of what had happened, and to request them to come on to Colonel Tremper's, as an emergency might arise that would require their presence and help.

He did not really believe in the efficacy of Aunt Celia's intervention, though Eva Tremper's faith in the old negress was so strong.

As the hour of noon approached, Eva took him to the place where she had safely put away Celia's clay image, that he might witness the solemn and mysterious operation of sticking a pin in its left leg.

"Are you really going through with that foolishness again?" he mildly inquired.

"Of course I am," answered Eva, "and it is not foolishness. I am going to do exactly what Celia told me to do, and I believe that good will come of it."

"Well, there can be no harm in it, anyhow."

Something of a surprise awaited them when they reached the image and observed its condition, the mud of which it was made having hardened during the night.

"You will have to give it up, my dear," remarked Rush. "It will be impossible to stick a pin into that stuff."

"You are mistaken. Use your eyes better. Look at what is meant for the left leg. That is what I am to stick a pin into to-day, and I am sure it is soft enough for that purpose."

And so it was. Though all the rest of the rude image was dried out and ready to crumble, that leg was as moist and soft as when it was brought to the house.

"That proves that Celia knew what she was talking about, and that the operation is worth performing," said Eva. "Give me the right time, and I will obey her instructions."

"You will want solar time, I suppose, and my watch does not give that; but I will see that you have it right."

He made a brief calculation, told her to stand ready, and just at the minute that indicated noon by the sun, she thrust the pin into the clay as she had been directed to do.

They remained there a little while, talking over the matter, until the image suddenly collapsed before their eyes, and nothing but a pile of dry earth was left.

"That is strange," observed Rush. "I wonder what it means?"

"I don't know, but I hope it means good luck."

The day passed dolefully, though somewhat hopefully, uncertainty producing its usual fruit of fret and worry, and it was not until late at night that Celia returned.

She was warmly greeted and eagerly questioned; but there was a light of triumph in her look which told Eva at least that her mission had succeeded.

But she had not brought Salamander Sam back, and everybody wanted to know what had become of him.

"He's all right," replied the negress. "You trust yer Aunt Cely fur dat. W'en I got dar, ol' Eph hed his right a'm tied up, and it was worryin' him pow'ful bad. Tell yer, chile, yer Aunt Cely don't fool wid Ohi fur ruffin'. He warn't ready den to give up an' let de boy go; but I reckon you worked dat pin right at noon-time, Mi s' Eva."

"Indeed I did, Aunt Celia."

"Ohi struck him den, and he dropped all of a sudden, and you ort to heern him how! De cha'm was too much fur him, and he jess tumbled all of a heap."

"You remember, Rush, how the clay image suddenly crumbled and fell?" suggested Eva.

"Dat's jess how ol' Eph tumbled down an' gi'n up, an' den he promised to tu'n young Mars'r Sam loose an' sen' him home."

"Why did you not bring him away, Celia?"

"Couldn't do it, chile. Dat 'u'd ha' broke de cha'm. Ol' Eph promised to let him go 'f I'd take de Ohi off, an' dat couldn't be done all to oncet. 'Bout de middle ob de arternoon de Ohi 'u'd be done gone off, an' den Mars'r Sam 'u'd be all right."

"But how could he get home?"

"Easy 'nuff, I reckon. He could git cl'ar ob de swamp befo' nightfall, an' den he could fin' his way home, an' be orter be gittin' along yer' some time befo' mawnin'."

Morning came, and Salamander Sam had not put in an appearance; but the Coahoula contingent arrived by daylight.

August Engel and Boney Priddle had not waited upon the order of their going when they got the news, but had started at once, and they brought to Colonel Tremper's two men who could be depended on in a pinch.

The morning was passed in discussing the situation and anxiously waiting for Sam.

As nothing was seen of him up to the hour of noon, the hope of his arrival was abandoned, and it was agreed that it was necessary to go in search of him without any further loss of time.

"He got away f'm dar all right," said Aunt Celia when she was appealed to; "but somethin' happened to him sence, an' I'm afraid dat Mawley Plympton's got his clutches onto de po' boy ag'in."

Dinner was quickly dispatched, and a well-appointed expedition set out, composed of Powell, Engel, Boney, the two men from Coahoula, and two negroes of the Tremper plantation, one of whom was Celia's son Ben.

Colonel Tremper was anxious to make one of the party, but he was considered too old for active service, and was told that he would be of more use at home.

They were all mounted, well armed, and well supplied with provisions for the exigencies of an extensive search in the forests and swamps.

Nothing was said of their purposes, except in a general way, before they left Colonel Tremper's; but the first point of the campaign was definitely outlined in the minds of Powell and Engel, who were the leaders of the expedition.

Instead of starting an almost aimless hunt through the woods in a search for Salamander Sam, which would be too much like looking for a needle in a haystack, they meant to seek at once the source of the trouble and strike direct at the root of the evil.

That is to say, they intended to find Morley Plympton, hold him accountable for the calamity, and compel him to remedy the wrong or atone for it.

If Salamander should prove to be dead, the man who was responsible for his death would have to follow him to the other world.

This was positively settled between these two, and it only remained to find Morley Plympton.

As he was supposed to make Gideon Scrooby's house his home, and to pass most of his time there, that was the first objective point of the expedition.

It was reached a little after dark, and Gideon Scrooby, after a late supper, was found smoking his pipe on the veranda.

Naturally he was surprised at the arrival of such a large and apparently warlike force, and doubtless was also somewhat alarmed, though he concealed his surprise and alarm pretty fairly, and calmly awaited their approach.

Powell rode up to the veranda with Engel, and the former opened fire immediately.

"We are looking for Morley Plympton," said the engineer. "Where is he?"

Scrooby called up all the resources of his sly and wary nature to meet this blunt and straightforward attack.

"Looking for Mr. Plympton? Really, I cannot say where he is. He is here off and on, as I may say, but he is seldom here for any length of time."

"Is he not in your house at present?"

"He is not. I am sure of that. I act as his agent, and perhaps I may serve your purpose, unless it is some special and particular business that you have with him."

"You shall have it, plain and straight, Mr. Scrooby. A young man, or boy, of whom you have heard often enough—Sam Startle by name, or Salamander Sam by nickname—has been seized and carried away by a band of wild negroes, and we know Morley Plympton employed them to do that deed."

"You surprise me, Mr. Powell. I cannot believe that my friend and employer would do anything of that kind. There must be some mistake about it."

"There is no mistake about it, Gideon Scrooby. I am sure that he has done that very thing, and I have no doubt that you know quite as much about it as I do, and probably a good deal more. We want the man who is responsible for running off Sam Startle, and we mean to have him. He must return that boy, or suffer the consequences. If he is not here, where is he?"

"You have no right to take that tone with me, Mr. Powell. I do not know where Mr. Plympton is. I am not his keeper."

"That is what Cain said about Abel. This case is different from that, as we do not suppose that you have made away with Morley Plympton; but we insist upon knowing from one partner where the other partner is, and you must tell us."

"I must, must I? Well, sir, I do not recognize your right to question me in this way, and if I knew, I would not tell you."

At a sign from Powell, Boney Priddle and August Engel dismounted.

"That is enough," said the leader. "It brings the thing down to a fine point, and we know just how we have got to get our work in. Grab him, boys!"

August and Boney seized the Scotchman, and dragged him unceremoniously from the veranda to the ground, in spite of his struggles and protestations.

"Cut some switches," ordered Powell, and the two men from Coahoula hastened to obey the order.

Scrooby was dragged to one of the smallest of the live oaks near by, his coat was hurriedly taken off, and his arms were put around the tree and tied by the wrists, fastening him there securely.

The two men from Coahoula came forward, and the purpose of his captors was made shockingly plain to him.

Scrooby, anticipating what was in store for him, yelled and called for help, and two of his negro servants and one woman showed themselves, but, perceiving that they could be of no use there, prudentially retired.

"Now, Scrooby," said Rush Powell, "you have got to tell us what we want to know, or take a whipping, and I give you fair warning that when we begin, every stroke will take the hide."

"You wretches!" screamed the Scotchman. "You villainous brutes! How dare you take hold of me! Don't you know that the law will punish you severely for this?"

"How dare you speak of the law?" retorted Rush. "Was it under the law that you hired Jim Summers and his gang of swamper to attack and murder my party? Is it according to law that you have advised and backed up Morley Plympton in all his rascally undertakings? Those who appeal to the law should be governed by the law. You know that you deserve hanging, and you should be thankful that we let you live. We are the law to you just now, and we are waiting for you to tell us what we want to know."

"I have nothing to tell," grumly answered the Scotchman between his clinched teeth.

It was Boney Priddle who wielded the switch, and he brought it down on Scrooby's broad back with such a cut as forced a yell that made the negroes turn blue and run further away.

"Quit that!" growled the Scotchman. "Don't do it again. I'll tell what you want. I'll tell all I know."

"Tell it now, Scrooby," ordered Rush.

"Turn me loose, then."

"Tell it as you stand, and tell the straight truth, too, or you will be sure to suffer. Where is Morley Plympton?"

"I know where he started to go to; but I don't know where he is now."

"Where did he go to?"

"Out into the swamps to the haunt of those wild niggers. He ought to have been back long before this, and I am afraid that something has

happened to him. I cautioned him against mixing up any more with those gangs."

"So you know all about it, just as I supposed you did. Go on, then, and tell us what he went out there for. Be quick about it, as we have no time to spare."

"He heard that the boy you spoke of had been taken by those niggers, and he went out there to see about it."

"Just so. He went out there to see if they had carried out his orders and made a sure thing of Sam Startle's death. Was that the way of it?"

"He didn't say that," objected the Scotchman.

"But you understood him to mean that. All right, Mr. Scrooby. I believe you have told the truth as far as you have gone, and we don't care to go into the whole story just now."

"Are you through with me then, Mr. Powell? May I go?"

"Yes, Mr. Scrooby, you may go with us!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that we don't propose to miss any points from this on, or to leave an enemy in our rear. We are going to find Morley Plympton, and we shall take you along as an ally that may be useful in more ways than one."

"You have gone too far already, young man. The law will make you pay for this."

"I have already cautioned you, Mr. Scrooby, against alluding to the law. When the time of payment comes, we will have a general settling up all around, and then you may look out for hot-shot and plenty of it."

"You can't lawfully hurt me, anyhow," protested the Scotchman.

"That depends on whether Sam Startle proves to be safe. If he does not, we will know what to do with you. Just now we are going to bring the two partners together. Tell us which of your horses you prefer to ride, and you shall have it."

The horse which Gideon Scrooby indicated was saddled and prepared for a journey, and his coat was restored to him, and he mounted and rode away with his captors.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PITCHER AND THE WELL.

"WHOM a god wishes to destroy," as the old saying reads, "he first makes mad," and it may be said of Morley Plympton that after he had knocked Salamander Sam into the water, his course and actions were those of a crazy man.

Probably it was a mixture of feeling and facts that combined to send him "off his nut," as it is not unreasonable to suppose that a sudden stroke of remorse may have had something to do with it, strangely mingling with his joy at having finally got rid of the obstacle that blocked his way to a fortune.

It is likely, too, that the mixture of snake poison and alcohol poison which had lately been struggling in his system had so far unbalanced his brain, that not much was needed to upset it.

Certain it is that when it seemed clear to him that Salamander Sam would never again show his head above that dark water, he ran away as if he had been frightened out of his wits.

He ran straight enough for a while; but his course soon took a turn, and before he had got half a mile from the spot where he struck the blow, he had doubled on his track completely, and was running toward the direction from which he had come with Sam Startle.

He kept on running swiftly, however, as if flying from some danger or horror, fear or excitement giving speed and strength to his limbs, as if he felt that he was bound to run until he fell.

At last he did fall.

Utterly exhausted, and unable to stir another step, he dropped on the ground and lay there unconscious, in a stupor much quieter and more profound than that which had followed the snakebite experience.

He lay there a long time, and when he awoke he had only partially recovered his senses, and was so weak that he found himself unable to rise.

There was a remedy that he knew of—at least, a temporary remedy—for such weakness as that, and he had sense enough to feel for his whisky flask and put it to his lips.

Before he arose he had drained the last drop and thrown away the flask; but it had put new life into his limbs, though the fiery fluid that coursed through his veins only added to the weight that pressed on his brain and destroyed his reason and judgment.

He had entirely lost the recollection of everything that had occurred since he was bitten by the snake in the swamp, and his presence at that time and place was puzzling to him.

Therefore he steadied himself against a tree and tried to settle it in his dazed head where he was and how he had come there.

Finally he arrived at the conclusion that he was on his way to the haunt of old Eph's gang to make sure that Sam Startle had been put out of his way.

Something had happened to him—he did not

know what—and he had got out of his course, but he would find it again, and would go on and attend to that vital matter of business.

Just then he was out of his reckoning—no doubt of that—but he had a vague idea of the direction he ought to take, and he would keep straight on until he should come to some region or landmark that he could recognize.

He did not run any more, being entirely too weak for that, but staggered on feebly and slowly, pressing his head with his hands in the effort to keep the direction he wanted to take, and now and then stopping to rest and gather strength to continue his journey.

Thus the day was far spent when he found himself in the swamp where the snake had struck him.

The route was then difficult and dangerous for a man of firm nerves and steady limbs; but Plympton believed that he knew the way, and he pushed forward boldly, though more feebly than ever.

It was then a long time since he had eaten anything, as he had brought no food from Gideon Scrooby's house, expecting to get plenty among the negroes, and the effects of the whisky that had stimulated him for a time had passed off.

So he staggered on slowly, with uncertain steps, often in danger of stumbling and falling into pools or stretches of stagnant water, and always too much dazed to heed or note the reptiles that beset his pathway, but steadily pressing forward, and picking his course as if by instinct among the intricacies of the swamp.

Under the circumstances it was wonderful that he got on at all; but he was eager to reach the negroes' island and make sure of the fate of Salamander Sam, and was kept up and going by sheer force of will.

If he could have known that his supposed victim was then vastly better off than he was, safe and resting comfortably on Reuben Hensel's bed, the knowledge would have knocked him over at once.

He staggered on until he reached the shore of the lake in which the island was situated, and then his strength deserted him as it had done after his crazy run in the forest, and he dropped senseless.

Whether fortunately or unfortunately, he had been seen by some of the negroes on the island, who had watched his progress closely, wondering what was the matter with him.

The hints dropped by Aunt Celia concerning the wealth of Morley Plympton and the gain that might be derived from him had not been unheeded by old Eph, who had talked the matter over with his followers, and had given them such instructions as the case required.

He had fully expected the white man to visit the island after the capture of Sam Startle—indeed, Plympton had assured him that he would come and see that the work he paid for had been properly done—and had determined that he should not be allowed to leave until he had been well squeezed for money.

The gang on the island, having been rather intimately acquainted with him in days past, knew him to be in the habit of taking too much to drink when he could get it, and as he was seen staggering and weaving his way through the swamp, the natural conclusion was that he was drunk.

When he fell at the shore of the lake, this suspicion became a certainty, and two stalwart negroes hurried across the water to make an easy capture.

He was picked up and slung over the back of one of them, who carried him to the island and laid him in a shady spot under the trees and near the huts.

Old Eph, who had long been famed as a Voodoo doctor, took medical charge of the case, and proceeded to administer to the patient such remedies as he believed would suit his supposed complaint.

He gave instructions to the women, and a lively boiling and stewing was begun, that gave promise of appetizing food.

Soon the old man had a hot and nourishing draught ready, which he fed to his patient very gradually at first, and more freely as he began to recover his senses.

In a little while he had Plympton sitting up and staring about, and then the real work of recuperation was begun.

One and all, from old Eph down to the pickaninnies, waited on the white man eagerly and anxiously, and he could not have been more tenderly cared for if he had been their nearest relation or dearest friend.

This was not because they cared for him, but simply because his living body was believed to possess a mercantile value for them.

In order to dispose of him to the best advantage, it was necessary to put him in good order.

The prospect was that he would soon be in fine condition, as he was seized by a ravenous appetite when he had finished old Eph's soothing and stimulating draught, and he ate as heartily as he was allowed to of the tasty and nourishing food that was offered him.

When he had been stuffed sufficiently, he called for whisky, but was given to understand

that there was none on the island, and that he must submit to a period of enforced abstinence.

Then he tried his feet, discovered that he could get about without much difficulty, and sauntered here and there for awhile, endeavoring to get things straightened out in his mind, and to settle upon the purpose that had brought him there.

Again his conclusion was the same as that at which he had arrived on his recovery from his former swoon, and he accosted old Eph, who had been following him around pretty closely.

It was with a decidedly business-like tone and an air of authority that he addressed the old negro.

"You got that white boy, did you?"

"Yes, Massa Plymp'on; we cotch 'um."

"What did you do with him?"

Eph pointed significantly at his stomach.

"What do you mean by that?"

"We eat 'um."

"You ate him? The deuce you did. I hope you cooked him first, then."

"Made plenty Voodoo soup. All gone but de bones, an' we flung dem inter de watah."

Though this statement should have been eminently satisfactory to Plympton as an assurance of the utter annihilation of the bodily existence of his enemy, he could not help a feeling of disgust and repulsion, which was plainly visible in his ugly look.

"You don't seem to like to be tol' 'bout dat, Mars'r Plymp'on," observed old Eph.

"You make me sick with your nasty story."

"Sakes alive! You said you wanted de young buckra put clean outer de way, an' we done did dat. I'd ha' kep' some ob de Voodoo soup fur you; but it ain't no good on'y fur Obi's folks."

"Don't give me any more of that talk. How am I to know that you really did put the young scamp clean out of the way?"

"Didn't I tole yer so?"

"I heard what you told me; but I want something in the way of proof. You must have saved his clothes."

"We had to bu'n de clo'es, Mass'r Plymp'on, in de fiah w'ot b'iled de kettle, so's to make de cha'm shuah. But we's got his gun an' his pistol."

Salamander Sam's carbine and revolver were brought forward and shown to Morley Plympton.

As he had never seen them, he of course could not recognize them, though he was obliged to admit that the carbine was such a weapon as a lad of Sam's age and style might be supposed to own and carry.

There seemed to be no doubt that Sam had been captured by the negroes, and it was reasonable to presume that they had made away with him, as they had agreed to do.

"I suppose I must believe you," said Plympton, "though you ought to have some way of proving the thing to me so that I can be certain of it. I don't like to pay out my money for nothing, and you have had a big pile of it. As you are satisfied, you ought to satisfy me."

"We ain't satisfied," suggested old Eph.

"Not satisfied? What the deuce do you mean by that? You have got the money, and you have got that gun and pistol, and you have had your Voodoo soup, and what more can you want?"

"We wants mo' money."

"More money? You may want the earth, but are not likely to get it, and you won't get another dollar from me. So you may just keep on wanting."

"We's gwine ter git it, Mass'r Plymp'on."

"I would like to know how you are going to get it."

"You's got to git it fur us. You's got lots o' money now, we knows dat, and you don't go 'way f'um yer' one step till we gits mo' money."

This was plain enough, and it put Morley Plympton to such serious thinking as his still dazed brain would permit.

The danger against which Gideon Scrooby had warned him had come to pass.

The pitcher had gone to the well once too often, and the time of breakage was at hand.

It was clear that the negroes meant to adopt, though they had never heard of them, the tactics of Italian brigands, and hold him for a ransom.

It was far from being so clear that he could do anything to prevent them from executing their intention; indeed, the possibility of rescue appeared to be as remote as the chance of escape.

He felt for his pistol, as it might be of use to him in a time of extremity; but it was gone, and what had become of it?

Probably, as he then supposed, the negroes had taken it when they picked him up and carried him over to the island, unless he had lost it during his wanderings in the woods.

Anyhow, it was not in his possession, and he had absolutely no defense against the felonious purposes of old Eph and his gang.

Therefore it would be best to try to conciliate them, with a view to getting out of the scrape in the easiest way possible.

"You must be joking, old man," said he. "You don't really mean to go back on an old friend in that way."

"Dar ain't no joke 'bout it, Mars'r Plympton. We's gwine ter hab mo' money."

"Well, I am ready to do the fair thing, and if you really think that you have not been paid enough for that job, I will try to satisfy you. How much more money do you want?"

"T'ousand dollahs."

If old Eph had said ten thousand dollars, or even a hundred thousand, it would not have conveyed to his mind the idea of a larger amount than the sum he named. His knowledge of figures was quite limited, and "t'ousand dollahs" represented vast and really fabulous wealth.

Plympton had sense enough left in his dazed head to appreciate this notion and to humor it.

"That is a tremendous pile of money," said he. "I have not as much as a thousand dollars in the world."

"You've got to git it, den."

"I don't know how I am to do that; but, if you want it so badly, I will go home and try to raise it."

"Sca'cely. You don't go 'way f'um yer', Mars'r Plympton, till we git dat money."

"One of you can go with me and get it."

"Not much. We don't do business dat way. You's gwine ter sen' one ob us to git it, an' w'en he fotches it yer', den we's gwine ter tu'n you loose."

"I could never get a thousand dollars by sending for it, and I wouldn't if I could."

"Den we's hab plenty Voodoo soup."

Plympton tried in vain to argue the question, and finally asked for time to consider it, which was given him.

In the mean while his captors seemed to be willing to fatten him, as he was favored with a very good supper, though his enjoyment of it was not increased by remarks concerning his condition for killing and eating.

After supper he considered the matter as coolly as he could, and was forced to the conclusion that he would have to comply with the demands of his captors.

They had evidently announced their ultimatum, and it was money or death—such a death, too, as he did not fancy for himself, though he had not objected to its infliction upon his young relative.

It would never do to be cut off just when he had removed the one obstacle, and his road to fortune was clear.

He had spoken the truth when he said that he possessed no such sum as a thousand dollars; but he believed that Scrooby had money, and of course his partner would be willing to advance the sum needed to get him out of pawn, when the security was undoubted.

He had a notebook in his pocket, on a leaf of which he wrote with a pencil this missive:

"MY DEAR GID:—Your prediction has come true. The pitcher has gone to the well once too often. That young scamp has been wiped out at last, and no doubt about it; but the niggers here have got me and I must give them a thousand dollars or die. I guess you will have to get it and send it, as I can't see any other way out of the scrape, and you know that I am safe to pay now."

"Yours in trouble,
"MORLEY."

Of course he could write what he chose, as none of the negroes could read; but this was all he thought it worth while to send.

He folded the leaf, addressed it to Gideon Scrooby, and gave it to the head man of the gang.

"That will bring you the money," said he, "if it is possible for me to get it."

"We'll sen' it off airly in de mawnin'," observed old Eph.

Plympton explained where and how Scrooby was to be found, and then sought a place where he could lie down and rest.

Slumber came to him almost instantly; and he slept a sound and dreamless sleep until late in the morning.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A WELCOME SURPRISE.

WHEN Rush Powell and his party left Gideon Scrooby's house in the night time, they noticed that their prisoner had selected a fine and fast horse for his riding; but that fact, suspicious as it was, did not worry them in the least.

The Scotchman was not noted for dashing bravery, and they knew that a rifle or a revolver could put a sudden stop to the career of himself or his horse, in case of an attempted escape.

Sufficient precautions were taken, however, to obviate the necessity of any violent action by keeping him from the temptation to try to break off.

Ben and his black comrade took the lead as guides, then came the two Coahoula men, Rush Powell rode next with the prisoner, and August Engel and Boney Priddle brought up the rear.

The progress of the party was slow, as even Ben, who was better acquainted with those woods and swamps than any of the others, found it a very difficult matter to keep the right course in the darkness.

He easily reached and recognized the place where he and Salamander had been captured by the swamp negroes; but after that he was

obliged to move more cautiously, stopping to take frequent observations of both sky and land, as he confessed that he had only a general idea of the direction of the point at which they were aiming.

What was to be done when they should reach that point was the great uncertainty of the expedition.

The two leaders did not disclose their plan to the others, and it was probable that they had not decided on any definite course of action, but expected to be controlled by circumstances.

Powell had but a very faint hope, if any, of finding Salamander Sam alive; but he meant to get hold of Morley Plympton if he was above ground.

Then, if it should turn out that Sam had been murdered, the man who was responsible for his death should surely not live to enjoy the fruits of his villainy.

Gideon Scrooby was silent and glum, speaking not a word to any of his guards, and none of the party saying anything to him; but he did not seem to be thinking of making an effort to escape.

So they worked their way forward through the forest, cautiously and slowly, until daylight came and gave them a better chance.

Then they made a temporary camp in a glade, prepared and ate a hasty breakfast, and, straightened out their limbs after their tedious ride.

Just as they were about to mount and take up the route again, they were treated to a most welcome and joyful surprise.

Reuben Hensel and Salamander having got thus far on their way to Colonel Tremper's, perceived the smoke of the campers' fire, and crept forward together to see what it meant.

Very cautiously they approached the camp, as severe experiences had taught at least one of them that foes were to be found in the forest, and Hensel was determined not to let his young friend out of his sight; but all that was at an end when they were gladdened by the view of familiar faces.

"They are your friends, Sammy," joyfully whispered Hensel. "I see Rush Powell and August Engel."

Sam had caught sight of them almost as soon as his companion, and they ran to the camp, the lad shouting at the top of his voice.

This made a great and sudden change in the situation, and all were happy but the Scotchman, who frowned and stared at Salamander as if he supposed him to have risen from the dead—a very salamander, indeed!

Explanations were in order, and Sam gladly told his story, with a little help from Reuben Hensel.

It was told in detail and at considerable length, as nobody was in a hurry just then, and was listened to with the intensest interest.

"I knowed dey'd tu'n him loose arter mammy'd put de Obi onto 'em," declared Ben, when the lad related his safe exit from the island.

The episode of the snakebite was a thrilling one, though the now recognized hero told it so briefly and simply, and his conduct on that occasion was both praised and condemned.

"You deserve to suffer, you young scawag," averred Powell, "for risking your life to save the mean and deadly enemy who had sought to kill you again and again, and it would have served you just right if he had turned on you after that and murdered you."

When it was shown that Morley Plympton had tried to do that very thing, and had good reason to believe that he had accomplished his object, there were no bounds to the indignation of all but Scrooby, who was then more grum and stolid than ever.

He saw Sam Startle—Salamander Sam—there, whom he had supposed to be surely dead, alive and jolly; but, what had become of Morley Plympton?

The same question was agitating the minds of some of the others just then.

"That lets you out, Scrooby," observed Rush Powell. "The young gentleman is alive, in spite of all the villainy that had been working against him, and now we can't hang you for being accessory to his murder."

"May I go home, then?" meekly inquired the Scotchman.

"Well, no—not just yet. I am not sure that we are through with you. We know who did try to kill our friend, and we may want you to help us find your partner."

"I don't know anything more about him than I have told you," declared Scrooby.

A council of war, in which all the members of the expedition took part, was held to decide whether they should turn back or go further.

Powell was of the opinion that Morley Plympton ought to be hunted down and brought to justice, and Reuben Hensel agreed with him. Engel thought it was not worth while to bother any more about the missing man, and Salamander, glad at finding himself safe and among his friends, was quite willing to let him drop.

This question was settled for them in a manner quite as unexpected as was the appearance of Salamander Sam.

"Hush!" ordered Hensel, whose sight and

hearing were very acute. "I saw somebody coming this way; but he has caught sight of us and dodged out of the way."

"It was a nigger," thought Ben, who was also on the alert.

"Spread out and close in on him!" was Rush Powell's quick command. "Whoever it is, we must not let him get by us."

He did not get by them, though he tried hard to do so, and though he was skilled in sneaking and creeping.

Under Powell's directions the party spread out, closing in on him rapidly, and his only chance was to give up the attempt to pass them, and to turn back.

He tried this; but Reuben Hensel and Ben were both too quick for him, and he was caught and brought into camp.

He proved to be a negro, and there could be no doubt that he was one of the wild men of the swamp; but he protested against his capture.

"W'ot a' you doin' to me, you w'ite folks? I hain't been doin' nuffin' to you. I's jess gwine on 'bout my business, an' not doin' nuffin' to nobody."

"What is your business, and where were you going to?" demanded Powell.

"Gwine ter fin' Mars'r Gidyun Screwbug."

"Mr. Gideon Scrooby is here. What do you want with him?"

"I's got a papah fur him."

"Give it to me."

Resistance was useless, and the negro handed Morley Plympton's letter to Powell, who proceeded to open it.

"Stop that!" cried the Scotchman. "If that paper is for me, you have no right to read it."

"Quite as good a right as you can show for some of your performances," coolly answered Rush, and he read the paper aloud for the benefit of Scrooby with the rest.

"I believe I will keep this, Scrooby. It is good evidence as far as it goes. Now you know where your partner is. Shall you go on and find him and take him out of pawn; or don't you happen to have a thousand dollars about you?"

"I would not spend a dollar on him," grumbled the Scotchman, "and I don't care a cuss what becomes of him."

"Not now, I suppose, since he was mistaken about the fate of my young friend here, and is no longer safe to pay. But we want to get hold of him, so that the law may have a fair chance to deal with him, and it is our duty as Christians to look after him, anyhow. What puzzles me is, why should he have gone back to that gang after he supposed that he had made an end of Sam?"

This problem remained unsolved, and the party considered the question of a further advance.

It was believed that the island haunt of the negroes was nearly impregnable; yet there was great confidence in the strategic abilities of August Engel, and Rush Powell was firmly of the opinion that where there is a will there is a way.

So it was decided that they should go on and "foller the thing up," as Boney Priddle expressed it, perhaps to get hold of Morley Plympton, and at all events to learn his fate.

Powell wanted to send Salamander back to Colonel Tremper's; but as Sam resolutely refused to be sent, it was agreed that one of the negroes should return and inform the people there of the lad's safety and the progress of the expedition.

Gideon Scrooby was more than willing to be sent back, or to go of his own accord; but was informed that he would still be held as a prisoner, not to be released until the return of the expedition.

Reuben Hensel offered his services as a guide, which were gladly accepted, as he was thoroughly acquainted with all the woods and swamps of that region, and he led the party by the easiest and most direct route toward the haunt of the black swamps.

The captured negro was also brought along as a prisoner, and care was taken that he should not escape and inform his comrades of the force that was moving against them.

When they came to the swamp which it was necessary to cross to reach the lake, they were obliged to dismount, as the route which they must follow was impassable for horses, and their animals were left in charge of the remaining negro from Colonel Tremper's place.

Gideon Scrooby strongly objected to entering the swamp, but was forced into line with the rest, and they went on in single file, with Reuben Hensel in the lead.

At the shore of the lake it was evident that there would have been no harm in allowing the islanders to be informed of their approach, as they had been easily discovered, and a number of negroes were collected over there to inspect them and wonder at them.

There was no sign of fear among them, as they, like all the swamps, were convinced of their superiority to the rest of creation, although being negroes, they retained the awe of "w'ite folks" that was derived from generations of slavery.

Of course they were obliged to regard the expedition as hostile, seeing Salamander Sam

among them, together with the man who was sent away with Morley Plympton's letter; but there was plenty of dangerous water between them and the opposing force, and they naturally considered themselves safe.

Considerably to the surprise of Powell and his friends, Morley Plympton was visible in the front rank of the negroes, apparently free and unheeded.

Old Eph opened the ball by yelling to the white men and inquiring what they wanted.

"We want the white man you have over there," answered Powell.

"You can't git him, 'less you 'a' got a t'ousand dollahs to pay fur him."

"Send him over here, or we will come and take him, and then we will wipe out the whole gang of you."

"We'll kill de fus' w'ite man w'ot tries to come ober yer', an' de las' man, too."

Powell and Engel consulted with Hensel and Salamander concerning the force on the island and the means of getting at them, and learned that though the negroes were numerous, they were poorly armed, and that the lake could be crossed only by a series of stepping-stones, or sunken logs, which were partly under water, and which would not allow the passage of two persons abreast.

While they were considering these points and maturing a plan of attack, a change in the situation occurred, which completely upset their calculations.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE JAWS OF FATE.

MORLEY PLYMPTON'S sleep, as has been said, was sound and dreamless.

When he at last awoke, the sun was at least two hours high, and he felt greatly refreshed and invigorated.

More than that, his head was clear, and his memory had come back to him.

He clearly remembered the incident of the snakebite, his subsequent journey with Sam Startle, and his final wiping out of the "young scamp" by knocking him into the water and making sure that he did not reappear.

After that there were blanks in his memory, and he did not fully know how he had got there to the island, though his memory was clear enough concerning what had happened since his arrival.

He perceived that old Eph had told him a vile and disgusting lie in assuring him that Sam Startle had been killed and eaten, and the fraud that had been put upon him excited his indignation to the highest pitch.

It was fortunate that he had met the "young scamp" when he was making his escape, as he had thus been able to clear away the obstacle, and he could not doubt that his friend Scrooby would gladly purchase the freedom of the undoubted owner of the Plympton property.

As soon as he awoke he found his breakfast ready for him, and he ate heartily, having gained clearer and brighter views of his position and prospects since the memory of yesterday's events had returned to him.

When he had satisfied his appetite, he sought old Eph, and proceeded to tax him with falsehood in declaring that Sam Startle was dead.

"You let that young fellow go," said he. "You took him over there, and turned him loose in the swamp, to find his way home. I know that to be true, because I met him after he left here, and he told me all about it."

"'Spects you's been dreamin', boss," observed the old negro, though he was evidently taken aback by this accusation.

"If I have, I am wide awake now, and I know what I am talking about, and I know that you lied when you told me that he was dead."

"Why didn't you say dat w'en I tole yer so? Dat head ob yourn's gone wrong, I reckon. Anyhow, dat hain't got nuffin' to do wid dis odder business. Ef dat t'ousand dollahs don' come along, dar won't be no mo' use in talkin'."

After he had delivered this ultimatum there was not another word on the subject to be got out of old Eph, and Plympton was left to his own devices, except that he knew that he was closely watched, and that any attempt to escape would be promptly checked.

Yet he then felt himself to be clear of brain and reasonably strong of body, ready and fit to take advantage of any chance that might offer.

So the morning passed, and noon was approaching, when Plympton perceived an unusual stir and excitement among the negroes, who were running here and there and talking earnestly to their head man.

As he was mingling with them and listening to their talk, it did not take him long to discover that their excitement was caused by the report that somebody was coming through the swamp toward the lake.

It seemed to be impossible that the messenger sent to Gideon Scrooby could have returned so soon, and who else would be coming there?

As there was nothing to hinder him from so doing, Plympton followed the others to the side of the island where he had been landed, to watch

the approach of the party that was causing so much excitement.

His heart jumped with joy as he caught sight of Scrooby and one of the island negroes among the party; but it tumbled down and was squeezed into a small compass when he saw Sam Startle there, alive and very lively.

He also saw Powell and Engel and Priddle, men whom he knew to be hostile to him, and it was not to be supposed that they were there for his good.

As the "young scamp"—the Salamander with the charmed life, had miraculously escaped from death again, of course Gideon Scrooby would not be inclined to invest ransom money in his partner, and so that part of the business had come to a halt, if not to a full stop.

What then were they there for?

The brief parley between Rush Powell and old Eph did not serve as an answer to this question, though it made still plainer the fact that they were not there for the purpose of paying a thousand dollars to anybody.

Rush Powell's declaration that his party would cross to the island and wipe out the whole gang was regarded by Plympton as idle bravado, springing from utter ignorance of the situation.

The captive was sufficiently acquainted with the land and water there, as well as with the peculiarities of the wild negro population, to know that they were practically safe from hostile approach.

Though their only weapons, besides Salamander's carbine, which they probably did not know how to use, were a few pistols and hunting rifles, they would be able from a safe shelter to pick off one by one any adversaries who should attempt the dangerous crossing to the island.

Even if the white men should get the better of them, it was to be expected that spite would cause them to kill their prisoner.

It was plain to Morley Plympton that as matters then stood he had but one chance for his life, if not for his liberty, and he felt clear enough of brain and strong enough of body to work it for all it was worth.

He knew the stepping places, and believed that he could strike them in a hurried flight across the water, though some of them were invisible.

His hope was that the surprise of a sudden rush would paralyze his captors until he could get enough of a start to be covered by the rifles of the white men.

If they were not his friends, they at least wanted him, and would protect him from the negroes.

There was the chance, too, that when his captors saw that he was getting away from them, they would let him go, rather than kill him.

While these thoughts were passing through his mind, he had edged to the front rank of the negroes and near the crossing.

Suddenly he broke away, and dashed into the water.

It was this that startled the white people and upset their calculations; but they were equal to the occasion, and lost not a moment's time in doing all they could do to secure the safety of the fugitive.

Rush Powell and August Engel leveled their rifles instantly to cover his escape, and their example was followed by Boney Priddle and the two Coahoula men.

The reports of the magazine guns broke the silence of the swamp when one of the young negroes started swiftly after the fugitive only to be speedily struck down.

Another who followed him shared a like fate, and the blacks were quick to perceive that they must change their tactics if they would save themselves from general slaughter; so they drew back into the shelter of the trees, and began to use their hunting rifles, firing at their escaping captive, while they were themselves under a rain of bullets from the white men on the lake-shore.

Plympton had got a little more than half-way across the water, when he paused and staggered as if he had been struck, then made two more long and dangerous steps, and halted and wavered again.

At the first sign of trouble Reuben Hensel sprung out upon the crossing, and had nearly reached the fugitive when Plympton stopped and staggered the second time; but the rescuer was too late to save the other from losing his balance and falling into the water.

The next instant Reuben reached down and seized the sinking man's collar, in spite of the blood-curdling yell from Plympton, and a tug that nearly pulled the would-be rescuer into the water.

Then the cause of the yell was apparent to those on shore in the ugly snouts and snapping jaws of several alligators, and immediately the water was alive with them.

The saurian monsters had tasted the blood of the two negroes who had been shot, and were not to be balked of another victim.

To save his own life Hensel was forced to drop the already slaughtered body and hurry back to the shore.

This catastrophe left the expedition no further object, and the white men drew back out of the

possible reach of fire from the island, and prepared to return.

It was then discovered that Gideon Scrooby was missing, and the result proved that he had taken advantage of the excitement attending Morley Plympton's fall and fate to hurry back through the swamp to where the horses had been left, secure his own, and ride away as fast as the animal could carry him.

Nobody cared what became of him just then, and the entire party made the best of their way back to Colonel Tremper's.

It was late at night, or early in the morning, when they reached the house; Eva and her father were anxiously awaiting them, and they were most joyfully welcomed.

The next day it was discovered that Gideon Scrooby, probably fearing legal complications, had hastily packed up his papers and valuables and left the country.

There being no further contest or objection by Morley Plympton or any other person, Sam Startle—Salamander Sam, was soon legally declared to be the heir of Benjamin Plympton, and Judge Wilshire was installed as his guardian until he should come of age.

Rush Powell married Eva Tremper, and became by Judge Wilshire's appointment, the general manager of the Plympton property, as well as of the Tremper estate, Boney Priddle finding his use as overseer and factotum.

August Engel, who had always wished to settle down as a hunter and naturalist, took up his abode with Reuben Hensel, who had admired him greatly and was very fond of him.

As for Salamander Sam, though Colonel Tremper's house was his home when he was not at school, much of his time was passed in the forests and swamps with Hensel and Engel, never being more happy than when enjoying the wild freedom of the woods and glades. May he live long to enjoy what was won through so much personal peril and tribulation!

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, PUBLISHERS,
98 William Street, New York.